

RCAS Annual Report

2024



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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 *The Reality and Myth of BRI's Debt Trap-Evidences from Asia and Africa* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2024); *The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2024); *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).

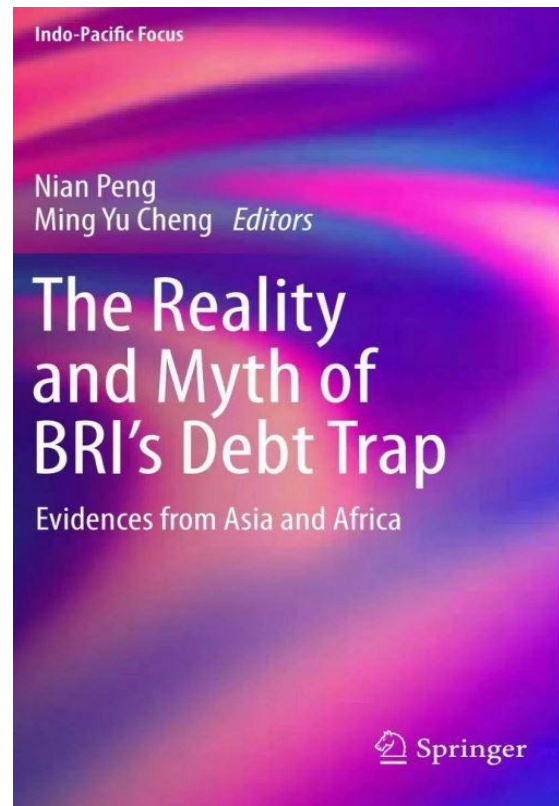
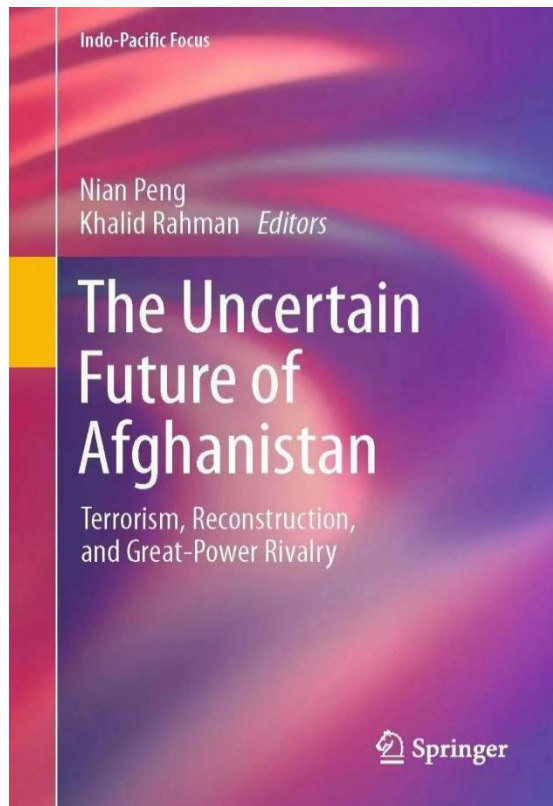
RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *Dhaka Tribune* in Bangladesh, *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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Featured Publications



Pacific Focus
Inha Journal of International Studies

ISI listed

Geography: The Geopolitics of China-Pakistan Relations

Ghulam Ali and Nian Peng

This article argues that Pakistan's strategic location provides a strong foundation for the durability of its relations with China. In support of this claim, it assesses the impact of other key factors, including the "Indian factor," in this bilateral relationship. The article illustrates Pakistan's "advantageous" location compared to China's inherent geographical limitations. The Chinese elite realized geographical realities from the beginning and pursued a long-term partnership with Pakistan. This was evident from China's investment in megaprojects in Pakistan, which were all premised on geography. Pakistan's geographical location has served China's interests in various ways, including breaking China's encirclement, acting as a gateway to the outside world, and preventing the infiltration of militancy into the mainland during the Cold War. Pakistan can potentially act as a hub between China and other regional countries in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. The article diverts emphasis from the "Indian factor" to enduring geographical conditions as the basis for the durable Beijing-Islamabad partnership.

Key words: China-Pakistan, CPEC, BRI, Geopolitics, Indian Ocean.

Introduction

For decades, China and Pakistan have maintained a durable relationship. This durability is particularly impressive considering the lack of shared history, socio-political systems, cultures, and ideologies between the two countries. What are the key factors that support the longstanding "all-weather" friendship between China and Pakistan? While existing literature focuses on the role of the Indian factor, this article argues that Pakistan's advantageous geostrategic location and China's inherent geographical constraints provide a solid foundation for this relationship. Pakistan is situated at the crossroads of significant regions in Central, South, and West Asia, as well as the Middle East. It also has a long coastline that borders important sea lanes of communication (SLOC). Additionally, Pakistan shares a border with China's underdeveloped western region, which is

Pacific Focus (2024)
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South China Morning Post

Nian Peng

Opinion | Will US-Philippines dialogue only worsen South China Sea tensions?

Washington and Manila are set to hold their latest '2+2' talks as the Philippines seeks to build more robust ties and uphold its interests in the South China Sea in the face of a 'more aggressive' China

Reading Time: 3 minutes



Nian Peng
Published: 10:00am, 10 Feb 2024

EASTASIAFORUM



**NORTHEAST ASIA
SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Marcos' new code of conduct for the South China Sea is a non-starter

Published: 02 January 2024
Reading Time: 4 mins

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Nian Peng

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EASTASIAFORUM

China and India rebuild trust on the path to reconciliation

Published: 25 December 2024
Reading Time: 5 mins

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Ghulam Ali



ThinkChina

POLITICS ECONOMY TECHNOLOGY HI

A new power triangle? The potential alliance between ASEAN, the GCC and China

24 DEC 2024 | POLITICS



By Ghulam Ali

Deputy Director, Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies

With the ASEAN-GCC summit set to be held in Kuala Lumpur in 2025, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to the session. Is the ASEAN-GCC grouping an upcoming alternative to other organisations such as BRICS? Academic Ghulam Ali explores the

THE DIPLOMAT

China Deepens Its Engagement With Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan

China has vastly increased economic engagement with Afghanistan as it eyes a new node in the Belt and Road Initiative.

By Ghulam Ali
December 04, 2024



EASTASIAFORUM

Economics, Politics and Public Policy in East Asia and the Pacific

Chinese yuan gains currency in the Gulf states

17 January 2024

Author: Ghulam Ali, Hong Kong Research Centre for Asian Studies

China's pursuit of internationalising the yuan, currency swaps, e-currency, cross-border deals and digitalised currency have recently made international news. These efforts are mainly on the rise with Gulf states.



CHINA US Focus

Foreign Policy

Trump 2.0: Gulf's Impact on China

Dec 03, 2024 Like 0 Share Tweet



Ghulam Ali

Deputy Director, Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies

Donald Trump will begin his second term as the 47th U.S. president on Jan. 20. This consequential development will occur just as the U.S.-China rivalry has become a decisive force in shaping global geopolitics. While the rivalry will manifest across various spheres, it will be particularly pronounced in the Persian Gulf region for several reasons.

The region, which is at the core of the broader Middle East, is rich in oil and gas reserves. It also occupies a key geostrategic position at the juncture of East and West and holds spiritual significance for three major religions. Although most scholars downplay the role

CHINA US Focus

Security

Is Bangladesh Headed for Long-Term Stability?

Aug 12, 2024 Like 0 Share Tweet



Sujit Kumar Datta

Former Chairman of Department of International Relations, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh



Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus signs the oath book as the country's head of the interim government in Bangladesh at the Bangabhaban, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Aug 8, 2024.

Content

About RCAS.....	1
Featured Publications.....	3
RCAS Event.....	5
RCAS Book.....	31
RCAS Paper.....	35
RCAS Commentary.....	51

RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng's Views on Marcos' State Visit to Vietnam

Were Cited by Japan Times

RCAS, Jan. 30, 2024

Frustrated with the slow progress in reaching a regional maritime code-of-conduct with China, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is turning to neighboring South China Sea claimant states to boost regional security cooperation and potentially forge a united front against Beijing at a time of growing friction in contested waters.

A first step in this direction came Tuesday as the Philippines signed two memoranda of understanding (MoUs) on security with Vietnam that will not only deepen coastguard cooperation but also help prevent untoward incidents in the South China Sea, where both countries have overlapping claims.

Signed during the final day of Marcos' two-day state visit to Hanoi, the deals aim to “enhance coordination on maritime issues bilaterally, within the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and with other dialogue partners,” said the Philippine presidential office, noting that both sides would increase efforts to “promote trust” through dialogue and cooperative activities.

At the same time, Manila and Hanoi agreed to establish a hotline between their respective coastguards and form a joint coast guard committee to discuss common issues and interests.

But while important steps on policy coordination, the deals fall short of the “informal” bilateral code-of-conduct agreement Marcos has been proposing, experts say, arguing that there is currently little appetite by other claimant states to risk angering China and derailing talks on a wider maritime security deal with Beijing.

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Before meeting Vietnam's President Vo Van Thuong, Marcos described Hanoi as Manila's "sole strategic partner" in Southeast Asia, stressing that maritime cooperation was the "cornerstone" of their relationship.

In turn, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh was quoted by Reuters as calling for greater unity and closer cooperation, arguing that the world and regional situation "are evolving in a rapid and complicated manner."

The visit also saw the two sides sign a flurry of cultural exchange, trade and investments agreements, including a deal on rice trade to help Manila address supply concerns in times of crisis.

Marcos also welcomed interest by Vingroup, Vietnam's largest conglomerate, in investing in the Philippines, particularly in electric vehicle battery production.



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▲ Marcos (right) and Vietnam President Vo Van Thuong inspect the honor guard during a welcoming ceremony at Vietnam's Presidential Palace in Hanoi on Tuesday. | AFP-JIJI

The bilateral security MoUs come at a time of heightened tensions in the South China Sea as Marcos has taken a much tougher stance than his predecessor on his country's territorial disputes with Beijing.

From laser pointers blinding Philippine sailors to collisions at sea near key military outposts, tensions have been rapidly surging in these strategically and economically important waters.

Against this backdrop, Marcos is attempting to get other Southeast Asian nations involved in Manila's fight against China. To achieve this, however, he is first aiming to lower tensions with those neighboring countries that have overlapping claims.

Experts such as Hanh Nguyen, from the Yokosuka Council on Asia Pacific Studies, view the recently signed security MoUs with Hanoi as a demonstration that South China Sea claimant states can at least temporarily put aside their differences to cooperate on maritime security.

This means that the MoUs will help both sides better understand each other's intentions and thus help prevent maritime incidents, especially involving fishermen operating in overlapping areas, Nguyen said.

Peng Nian, director of the Hong Kong-based Research Center for Asian Studies, has a similar view, noting that the main purpose of the MoUs is to manage the countries' fishing activities amid tensions over Vietnamese fishing boats entering waters claimed by the Philippines as part of its exclusive economic zone.

The move comes after Marcos revealed in November that Manila had approached Vietnam to craft a separate code of conduct and was hoping to extend similar talks to other neighboring states such as Malaysia.

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As the main reason for this, Marcos cited the slow pace of code-of-conduct negotiations between China and ASEAN, which have already taken more than 20 years.

Marcos' proposal, which essentially circumvents ASEAN's unanimity rule, is widely seen as part of his tougher stance on China, with the Philippine leader vowing not to cede "an inch" of territory to Beijing.

As such, Marcos has not only been bolstering his country's defense capabilities but also expanding Manila's security partnerships with the United States, Japan, Australia, and now Vietnam.

Experts say that Manila's decision to reach out to Hanoi was no coincidence.

"The Philippines and Vietnam are the most predisposed to collaboration as there's less territorial overlap in their claims and, more importantly, both have borne the brunt of Chinese aggression," said Zachary Abuza, a Southeast Asia expert and professor at the U.S. National War College.

This is something Japan has also recognized, singling out both countries for maritime law enforcement and coastguard cooperation. Moreover, Hanoi and Manila will be among the first beneficiaries of Japan's recently launched military aid program, which also includes reinforcing these countries' naval capabilities.

That said, experts warn against overestimating the significance of the security MoUs, particularly with regard to their potential impact on territorial disputes with China, which itself has a similar coastguard agreement in place with Vietnam.

Several analysts were also doubtful that Marcos' attempt to bypass ASEAN and craft a separate code of conduct between Southeast Asian claimant states could ultimately serve as the basis for a united front against Beijing.

“Marcos' proposal for a bilateral or multilateral code-of-conduct with just the ASEAN claimant states was greeted with relative official silence, which tells you all you need to know on its prospects with Malaysia, Brunei and Malaysia,” said Thomas Daniel, senior fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia.

The reasons for this are likely to be both externally and internally driven. On the former, Daniel said, China has repeatedly warned that any form of "ganging up" by the Southeast Asian claimants would be seen as a hostile move by Beijing and treated as such.

This is important as many ASEAN countries would not want to sour economic relations with China and would prefer to continue balancing relations with both Beijing and Washington without formally taking sides.

On the latter, the fundamental differences between ASEAN claimants are no less significant, said Daniel, adding that the “lack of trust between them continues to impede their ability to find common ground and greater negotiating cohesion.”

Peng has a similar view, arguing that the latest security MoUs “don’t mean that Vietnam stands with the Philippines on the South China Sea disputes” or shows support for Marcos’s policy on territorial disputes.

These steps are rather “elements of Vietnam’s balancing act in the South China Sea” aimed at expanding maritime cooperation with all partners, including claimant states, he said.

Indeed, analysts view this as part of Hanoi’s “bamboo diplomacy” designed to maintain national sovereignty while remaining flexible in its international partnerships.

However, this doesn't mean that Marcos' diplomatic push won't have an effect, with some arguing that it could help sort out lingering issues between other claimant states and set the stage for a more effective code of conduct among all ASEAN members down the line.

Gabriel Dominguez, "Amid China concerns, Manila and Hanoi agree to better manage maritime disputes", Japan Times, Jan 30, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/01/30/asia-pacific/politics/gabriel-vietnam-philippines/>. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/172.html>)

RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng was Interviewed by SCMP on Myanmar's Civil War

RCAS, Jul. 30, 2024

On 30 January, 2024, Dr. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, accepted an video interview from South China Morning Post (SCMP) on Myanmar's civil war. He analyzed the Chinese investment in Myanmar and the China-Myanmar relations.



▲SCMP's Myanmar Video

The interview can be seen on the SCMP page:

<https://www.scmp.com/video/asia/3250185/after-three-years-civil-war-myanmar-what-has-been-chinas-role-conflict>. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/173.html>)

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RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng was Interviewed by Global Times on the SCS Arbitration

RCAS, Jul. 14, 2024

Chinese institutions released a report on Thursday outlining the fallacies of the South China Sea Arbitration Award and the damage it does to the international rule of law. The report criticizes the unfairness of the Hague Tribunal and the illegitimacy of the Philippines' claims in the South China Sea.



▲ A China Coast Guard (CCG) vessel in patrol helps rescue a Philippine fishing boat in distress in the waters near China's Huangyan Dao, also known as Huangyan Island, in the South China Sea on June 29, 2024. Photo: Courtesy of China Coast Guard.

It argues that the ruling, released on July 12, 2016, has only complicated the already intricate issue in the region without offering a viable solution.

The report reaffirms China's position of "non-acceptance, non-participation, and non-recognition" of the ruling, and rejects any claims or actions based on it.

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The report also condemns the worship of the ruling by certain external forces, accusing them of trying to provoke tensions in the South China Sea and create discord between China and ASEAN countries.

The report was released by the Huayang Center for Maritime Cooperation and Ocean Governance, National Institute for South China Sea Studies and Chinese Society of International Law.

Experts say the arbitration award has become a "troublemaker" for peace and stability in the South China Sea, and a "spoiler" for bilateral relations between China and related parties.

Wu Shicun, president of the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, said at a press conference for the report's release on Thursday that the ongoing legal dispute between China and the Philippines has escalated. The recent "biggest-ever" conference to be held in Manila on Friday to mark the 8th anniversary of the arbitral award is a clear indication of this intensification.

Despite the ambitious efforts and heightened attention surrounding this issue, it is likely that these endeavors will ultimately prove futile, said the expert.

Why are Philippines' claims illegal?

The report pointed out that Nanhai Zhudao (South China Sea islands) are China's inherent territory. The activities of the Chinese people in the South China Sea date back over 2,000 years. China is the first to have discovered, named, explored and utilized Nanhai Zhudao and its relevant waters, and the first to have continuously, peacefully and effectively exercised sovereignty and jurisdiction over them. Nansha Qundao has never been part of Philippine territory.

The Philippines' territorial claim over part of Nansha Qundao is groundless from the perspectives of both history and international law, according to the report, which gives a detailed rebuttal against the typical excuses the Philippines has concocted to cover its invasion and illegal occupation in pursuit of its territorial claims.

For instance, the claim that "Kalayaan Island Group" is "terra nullius" discovered by the Philippines is groundless. In fact, the geographical scope of Nansha Qundao is clear, and the so-called "Kalayaan Island Group" is actually part of China's Nansha Qundao, which has long been an integral part of China's territory and is in no way "terra nullius."

The territorial scope of the Philippines has already been defined by a series of international treaties. The US, administrator of the Philippines during the colonial era, was clearly aware of these facts, read the report.

Anthony Carty, an Irish scholar of international law and author of "The History and Sovereignty of the South China Sea Islands," stressed in a recent interview with the Global Times that the Philippines has no right to claim sovereignty over the South China Sea and archival evidence supports China's claims over the islands.

"I don't see why on Earth or how the Philippines can claim any sovereignty over any islands in the South China Sea. The archives from France, Britain, China, the US, and Japan all agreed that the Filipinos have no territorial claim," said Carty.

The expert in international law called the so-called South China Sea arbitration of 2016 a "chaotic and manipulative use of international law," "a case of double standards," and "a legal trick."

Why can't arbitration resolution be accepted?

The report first stressed that the Arbitral Tribunal has no jurisdiction over the claims made by the Philippines, as they involve the handling of issues of territorial sovereignty and maritime delimitation. The former does not fall within the application of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which the resolution primarily relied on; the latter has been excluded from the arbitration proceedings by China.

The report, in a response to the Hague Tribunal that rejected China's claims citing that the "nine-dash" line contravenes UNCLOS, said that the "historic title and historic rights of China in the South China Sea have been long established under the rules of customary international law."

The report also questioned the political background of the 2016 tribunal's membership. In the South China Sea arbitration, the five arbitrators are from Germany, Poland, France, the Netherlands and Ghana, and none from Asia. This constitution resulted in a tribunal that took little account of Asian cultures, diplomatic and legal traditions, and other regional factors which should have informed its decision making.

"These judges appointed by countries may not be in any way consciously biased, but inevitably they're colored by the countries that they come from. So the whole idea of international adjudication is problematic," Carty told the Global Times, noting that he does not believe the international judiciary behaved objectively.

"If China followed such an unfair ruling, it could be a disaster for international law," Wu told the media on Thursday.

"The Arbitration Award is not a panacea for dispute resolution. The goal of international judicial and arbitral institutions is to settle disputes effectively. However, this objective cannot be reached by an ill-founded ruling issued by an arbitral tribunal without legitimacy that was politically motivated, manipulated and rejected by the other party based on sound and sufficient legal grounds," said the report.

Replay of legal farce doomed to fail

Local media reported that the Philippines is considering initiating a second international arbitration against China on environmental challenges. Experts pointed out that these are nothing more than a cognitive assault under the guise of legislation and a replay of the arbitration farce of 2016.

Wu believes that China could take multiple countermeasures in different sectors to deal with the arbitration proposals.

"Launching a new arbitration against China on environmental issues is a new direction of the Philippines' cognitive war against China, or a new battlefield. Considering that the Philippines has not gained much advantage in its sovereignty claims and recent engagement with China Coast Guard, its latest attempt is to label China as an environmental destroyer. But Philippines'

attempt is doomed to fail," **Peng Nian, director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies**, told the Global Times.

Wu underlined that rebutting the 2016 arbitration award and countering the erroneous statements of countries within and outside the region are not intended to provoke a new round of legal battles, but to make a rightful response to actions and forces that disrupt peace and stability in the South China Sea, interfere with China-Philippines relations and profit from the award.

He called the arbitration award a "troublemaker" for peace and stability in the South China Sea, a "spoiler" for bilateral relations between China and relevant parties, and a "roadblock" for the effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.

The scholar called on the parties concerned to return to the correct track of "resolving disputes through negotiation, bridging the gap through cooperation, and managing crises through rule-building."

The interview can be seen on the Global Times page:

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202407/1315897.shtml>. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/221.html>)

RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng was Interviewed by Global Times on the Direct Line of Communication between Leaders' Offices of China and the Philippines

RCAS, Jul. 19, 2024

A direct line of communication between leaders' offices of China and the Philippines will help to manage disputes in the South China Sea via diplomatic channels, and will put the brakes on the simmering tension between the two countries. It sends a signal to extraterritorial countries that Beijing and Manila are ready to manage their conflicts, experts said.



▲A China Philippines Photo: VCG

How effective this mechanism will depends largely on the Philippines' sincerity in settling down the disputes, as well as the results of coordination between different departments within the country, observers said.

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The Philippines and China's communication mechanism on the South China Sea will soon extend to the two states' presidential representatives and top diplomats, the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) said Tuesday night, according to the Philippine News Agency.

In a text sent to the news agency, the DFA confirmed that the recently signed "Arrangement on Improving Philippines-China Maritime Communication Mechanisms" would provide various "channels for communication" between the two nations, specifically on maritime issues.

These avenues include one "through the representatives to be designated" by the Philippine and Chinese presidents. Another channel is between the DFA and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including at the secretary (foreign minister) and undersecretary (vice foreign minister) levels or through their designated representatives.

China is always committed to properly handling maritime issues with the Philippines through dialogue and consultation, Lin Jian, spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, said when asked about the line at a press conference on Wednesday.

At the ninth meeting of the China-Philippines Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea held earlier this month, the two sides talked about improving the maritime communication mechanism between the two countries. China and the Philippines agreed to further enhance communication and dialogue between diplomatic and coast guard agencies, so as to jointly keep the maritime situation and the overall bilateral relationship stable, Lin said.

In January 2023, the two countries decided to establish a direct communication mechanism between the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of

China and the Maritime and Ocean Affairs Office of the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

Chinese experts described the newly established hotline as an upgraded communication mechanism that involves higher-level diplomatic departments.

The most important function of the hotline is to help diplomatic channels play a leading role in controlling the situation in the South China Sea, **Peng Nian, director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies in Hong Kong**, told the Global Times on Wednesday.

The recent maritime disputes between China and the Philippines proved that the Philippine military has sought to break diplomatic communication repeatedly, said **Peng**, noting that the tension between two countries is getting out of control due to lack of communication.

"Thus, the highest level of communication will help prevent disputes from escalating," said **Peng**.

Photos obtained by the Global Times exclusively from the China Coast Guard (CCG) on June 19 show the CCG's interception, boarding, inspection and expulsion of Philippine vessels when they illegally intruded into waters near China's Ren'ai Jiao (also known as Ren'ai Reef) in the South China Sea on June 17.

The CCG's law enforcement measures were aimed at intercepting illegal Philippine supplies and did not feature direct measures against Philippine personnel, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said on June 19 in response to Philippine claims that the CCG confiscated Philippine guns during the incident.

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Peng said establishing the hotline also sends a signal to extraterritorial countries, such as the US and Japan, that both China and the Philippines are still willing to manage the current situation in the South China Sea.

However, whether this new upgraded mechanism can ultimately work depends largely on the political will of the Philippines to resolve conflicts, as well as on coordination among different political departments within the Philippines, Chen Xiangmiao, director of the World Navy Research Center at the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, told the Global Times.

Chen said the existing mechanism is sufficient, yet Manila's constant provocations prevent the two countries from agreeing on how to manage disputes.

Apart from stirring up confrontations at sea, the Philippines is considering initiating a second international arbitration against China on environmental challenges, local media reported. Chinese experts slammed such foul play, noting it is nothing more than a cognitive assault under the guise of legislation and a replay of the arbitration farce of 2016.

The extent to which the upgraded hotline mechanism can help rein in China hawks in the Philippine military still needs to be seen, Peng said. He explained that this group of individuals are stubbornly anti-China and have close connections with the US, making it difficult to change their stance in a short period of time.

The interview can be seen on the Global Times page:

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202407/1316220.shtml>. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/227.html>)

RCAS Event

Dr. Nian Peng was Interviewed by SCMP on China-Southeast Asia BRI Cooperation

RCAS, Sep. 29, 2024

Southeast Asia is playing an ever-growing part in China's investment and diplomatic decisions, particularly as Beijing's rivalry with Washington heats up. In the third of a four-part series on China's ties with Asean, Orange Wang looks at how Beijing is using infrastructure to forge stronger links with the region.



▲ The Tegalluar Station in Bandung, Indonesia, is part of the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway, a landmark project under China's Belt and Road Initiative. Photo: Xinhua.

When Vietnam's new top leader To Lam visited Beijing in mid-August, infrastructure was very much top of mind.

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During the trip, China agreed to support a feasibility study for two standard-gauge railway projects and help in the planning of another one in the Southeast Asian country, inching it forward in updating its colonial-era railways so they can link with Chinese train lines.

Two weeks before that, Cambodia broke ground on the China-sponsored Funan Techo canal, which will connect the Mekong River with the Gulf of Thailand.

The developments point to a Chinese infrastructure drive in Southeast Asia in high gear, and that analysts say is likely to give Beijing a geopolitical edge over Washington in a “critical battleground”.

There are signs of movement elsewhere in the region, too. Bangkok launched passenger train services to Vientiane, Laos, three months after the approval of the second phase of a project in Thailand to connect high-speed railways in the three countries. The Laotian capital was first integrated into the Chinese high-speed railway network in December 2021, when a rail link to China’s Yunnan province opened.

Meanwhile, Jakarta and Beijing have started discussions about extending a China-backed high-speed rail line in Indonesia, and a Chinese consortium has reportedly bid for contracts to build a high-speed rail project linking Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

Nian Peng, director of the Research Centre for Asian Studies (RCAS) in Hong Kong, said there was an “accelerating trend” in infrastructure-based connectivity between China and Southeast Asia.

Citing the developments on the routes to Vietnam and Thailand, he said China’s rail links with Southeast Asian countries had moved from nearly nothing before the China-Laos high-speed railway opened three years ago to “blossoming in multiple spots”.

Peng predicted that this could help Beijing fend off the risk of the United States coaxing Southeast Asian countries into its orbit and pressuring them to decouple from the Chinese economy.

“If we can achieve seamless docking of our infrastructure on land, including for highways, railways and aviation, we can put Southeast Asia firmly in a China-centred supply chain,” he said.

“With the infrastructure connectivity between China and Southeast Asia advancing so rapidly, I think the US should be the most anxious one.”

He added that the US and its ally Japan were unlikely to fully satisfy the region’s huge appetite for infrastructure due to limitations in funding and decision-making mechanisms, leaving a lot of space for China.

However, Li Mingjiang, an associate professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, said the recent moves in China-Southeast Asia infrastructure cooperation were a “continuation” rather than an acceleration or a “new phase”.

He noted that there had been no quantitative or qualitative leap compared to previous projects over the past decade.

Still, he described Southeast Asia as a “priority” for China’s infrastructure engagement, adding that economic cooperation during the past three decades had helped put Beijing in a “leading position” over Washington in the region when it came to overall clout.

“We can expect such effects may continue to be seen in the future,” Li said.

He added that growing infrastructure investment would benefit China’s relations with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and help China compete for influence with other major powers in the region.

“Southeast Asian countries will also gain many benefits, such as for their long-term economic development,” Li said, noting that they might leverage China’s offers to bargain with other powers for more attention and support.

Building closer ties with Southeast Asian nations has become crucial for China in light of its fierce rivalry with Washington, a trade war that began under former US president Donald Trump and disruptions to global supply chains by the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Four years ago, the 10-member Asean bloc became Beijing's biggest trading partner, while China has been the grouping's top trading partner for 15 years straight.

In US dollar terms, China's exports to Asean grew by 10.6 per cent from a year earlier in the first eight months of 2024, and its imports from the bloc were up 3.5 per cent, according to the latest Chinese customs data on September 10.

Figures from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce showed that China's non-financial outbound direct investment to Asean jumped nearly 37 per cent in the first quarter of the year.

Many Chinese companies have begun channelling their shipments to the rest of the world through Southeast Asian countries or relocating parts of their production lines to the region to bypass trade restrictions, such as tariffs, imposed by the US and its allies.

The Asean countries have a population of nearly 700 million, representing a huge potential labour pool and a large consumer market for China to tap into.

In an article published by Foreign Affairs earlier this month, Lynn Kuok, the Lee Kuan Yew chair in Southeast Asian Studies at the Brookings Institution, said projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative were "generally welcomed" in the region.

Citing a survey by the Singapore-based ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute released in April, she warned that the drop in support for the US in the region should sound alarm bells in Washington, which "sees China as its main competitor and the Indo-Pacific as a critical battleground".

"Southeast Asia lies at the geographic heart of this vast and dynamic region," she added.

Several Washington-led plans cover Southeast Asian infrastructure development. They include the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, the Build Back Better World initiative and the Blue Dot Network.

In an article published earlier this year, Yan Shaojun, a research fellow at the government-backed think tank China Centre for International Economic Exchanges, said that infrastructure had become a key element in great power competition.

Yan warned that the US and other Western countries were likely to continue their “interference” in the belt and road – Beijing’s plan for building global trade and infrastructure links-and “neighbouring regions” including Southeast Asia would be a “top priority” for China in stabilising the strategy’s foundation.

“[We] should further leverage the unique advantages of border provinces like Guangxi and Yunnan in opening up to Asean to promote cooperation between China and Asean in areas such as infrastructure,” she wrote.

The idea of bridging Southeast Asia and China through infrastructure is not new.

Eight years ago, Asean members adopted a master plan aimed at greater connectivity within the bloc by 2025. In 2019, Asean and Beijing agreed to align this plan with the belt and road strategy.

In 1995, Mahathir Mohamad, then prime minister of Malaysia, proposed building a pan-Asian railway network that runs from Singapore to southwest China’s Kunming, passing through Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos.

Three decades later, the idea remains far from becoming a reality. But the proposed China-Vietnam rail lines, the completed China-Laos high-speed rail as well as the Thailand-China railway project and Malaysia’s East Coast Rail Link – both backed by Beijing and under construction – are all viewed as steps towards that vision.

While China has become Southeast Asia’s biggest infrastructure financing partner, an estimated US\$50 billion pledged by Beijing for funding in the region has gone unfulfilled, according to a study by the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank.

Wang Qin, a professor at the school of international relations at Xiamen University, said many Chinese-invested infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia were “not going so smoothly”, partly due to issues such as political instability and land acquisition problems in recipient countries.

He added that as the Chinese economy was still recovering, the country was likely to be more cautious about investing in expensive projects across the region in the future.

He expected China would work on completing existing projects first, adding that the US\$1.7 billion canal project in Cambodia was “not a huge investment” and was within China’s engineering abilities.

“We may focus more on such smaller projects that contribute to the development and livelihood of a country,” he said.

Li in Singapore also noted that Beijing had started to focus on “small but beautiful” projects and might not be as fixated on megaprojects as before.

He said Southeast Asian nations were keen to diversify their trade partners, inbound investment and industrial cooperation to reduce their economic dependence on China.

He added that though the supply chain connection between China and Asean countries would benefit from better transport links, it would also be influenced by other factors, notably trade wars.

Li said China and Southeast Asian nations should better manage South China Sea disputes while improving connectivity.

“If security issues continue to arise in the South China Sea, they could to some extent offset the positive impact of economic and infrastructure connectivity cooperation on China’s relations with Asean countries,” he said.

Peng of RCAS expected China’s role in the region’s infrastructure push to become increasingly important, with more breakthroughs in cooperative projects.

He said Southeast Asian demand for infrastructure investment from China would grow as they put greater emphasis on economic development in the aftermath of the pandemic.

China’s Belt and Road Initiative appeared to be shifting from casting a wide net to focusing on places with strategic significance like Southeast Asia, he added, expecting the country to spend more resources to firm up its neighbourhood amid Washington’s increasing presence there.

“The willingness on both sides is very high. The connectivity between China and Southeast Asia will certainly continue to grow in the future,” he said.

The interview can be seen on the SCMP page:https://sc.mp/yf29i?utm_source=copy-link&utm_campaign=3280250&utm_medium=share_widget. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/241.html>)

RCAS Event

Dr. Ghulam Ali attended a Round Table Discussion

organized by CLWS, India

RCAS, Oct. 5, 2024

Dr. Ghulam Ali, Deputy Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), attended a Round Table Discussion (RTD) on “Pakistan's Internal Challenges.” The RTD was organized by the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLWS), New Delhi, India, and was held on 3 October 2024, in both hybrid and in-person formats.



▲ Dr. Ghulam Ali attended a Round Table Discussion organized by the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLWS), New Delhi, India, on 3 October 2024.

He focused his presentation on how Pakistan's domestic instability can impact China-Pakistan relations. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/242.html>)

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RCAS Event

Dr. Ghulam Ali Gave A Talk at National Chung Hsing University

RCAS, Oct. 27, 2024

On 22 October 2024, Dr. Ghulam Ali, Deputy Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies, gave a talk to the 'International Master Program in Asia and China Studies (IMPACS)' at National Chung Hsing University (NCHU), Taichung. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/249.html>)



▲ Dr. Ghulam Ali Gave A Talk at National Chung Hsing University

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RCAS Event

Dr. Ghulam Ali was Interviewed by VOA on CPEC

RCAS, Nov. 17, 2024

On 15 November, 2024, Dr. Ghulam Ali, Deputy Director of RCAS, accepted an interview from VOA on the recent terrorist attacks on Chinese citizens in Pakistan. He analyzed the main reasons and the effects of this attacks on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor(CPEC) and China-Pakistan relations.



▲Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif visits Chinese Ambassador Jiang Zaidong at the Chinese Embassy on Monday. (PTV).

The interview can be seen on the VOA page:<https://www.voachinese.com/a/chinas-investment-in-pakistan-is-going-off-the-track-20241114/7864371.html>. (<http://www.rcas.top/event/254.html>)

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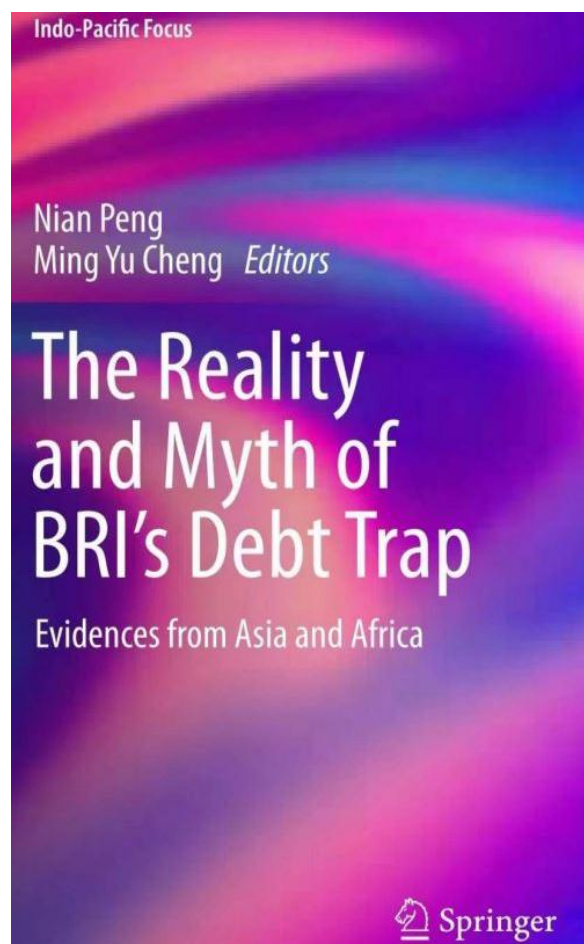
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RCAS Book

RCAS New Book of BRI is Published by Springer Nature!

RCAS, Apr. 23, 2024

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.



▲ Nian Peng, Ming Yu Cheng(2024), *The Reality and Myth of BRI's "Debt Trap": Evidences from Asia and Africa*, Singapore:Springer Nature.

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.

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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/counter-terrorism, 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 Indo-Pacific 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.

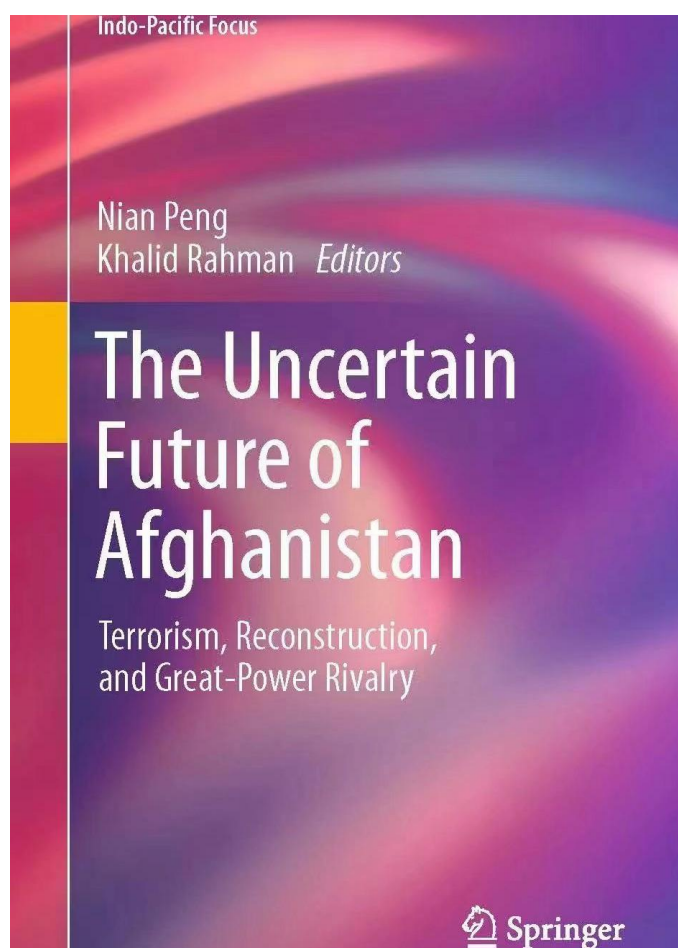
The Springer Nature links: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-97-1056-0>(<http://www.rcas.top/event/204.html>)

RCAS Book

RCAS New Book of Afghanistan is Published by Springer Nature!

RCAS, Jun. 22, 2024

RCAS is proud to announce that the new book-The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry is published by Springer Nature in June 2024. Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, and Khalid Rahman, Chairman of the Institute of Policy Studies (Islamabad) and nonresident senior fellow of RCAS co-edited this book.



▲Nian Peng and Khalid Rahman(2024), *The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry*, Singapore: Springer Nature.

This edited book aims to analyze the domestic politics and foreign relations of the country after the Taliban regained power in August 2021. It touched upon the key issues affecting the Taliban

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regime, such as peace talks, terrorism threats, BRI cooperation, and the policies of the great powers and neighboring countries toward the new regime in Afghanistan. It makes a significant contribution by incorporating various viewpoints from government officials, university scholars, and think tank experts from China, Japan, and South Asian states. The broad approach and extensive coverage of all relevant countries make this book a valuable resource for more than just a specific academic community. It appeals to a diverse readership, including academics, policymakers, journalists, and general readers.

The main content of the book is divided into ten chapters, in which the first chapter briefly introduces the aims and scope of this book. The following 3 chapters look into the domestic politics in Afghanistan. These mainly include the Afghan peace negotiations, the challenge of the Taliban regime, and the security threats and regional response under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The next 6 chapters examine US's Afghan policy, China-Afghanistan relations, and Russia, India, Pakistan, Japan's engagement with Afghanistan.

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/counter-terrorism, 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 Indo-Pacific 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/10.1007/978-981-97-2409-3>(<http://www.rcas.top/event/214.html>)

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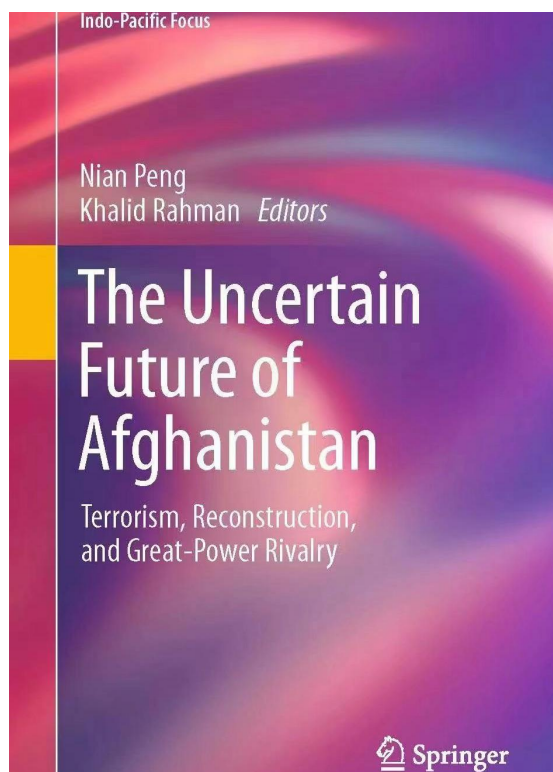
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RCAS Paper

Book Review: The uncertain future of Afghanistan: terrorism, reconstruction, and great-power rivalry, Small Wars & Insurgencies

RCAS, Jul. 2, 2024

The book *The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry* provides an overview of the situation in Afghanistan and South Asia, where the U.S., China, and Russia are engaged economically and in security matters. It also examines the terrorism threats in Afghanistan that could jeopardize regional stability and security. Afghanistan remains a focal point for regional countries and great powers seeking to advance their influence due to their geopolitical and geoeconomics interests. The book offers a comprehensive analysis of contemporary Afghanistan and the challenges it faces, including inclusive governance, human rights, security and terrorism, the economy, relations with regional countries, and Afghan migration. These challenges facing Afghanistan are interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation. In the context of terrorism and stability, the book highlights the historical Soviet-Afghan war and the role of the ‘Afghan Jihad’, which led to the emergence of Al-Qaeda as the champion of Afghan Jihad and a global terrorist outfit with anti-West agendas. Furthermore, the book discusses major terrorist groups such as Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Al-Qaeda. While some of these groups remain adversaries of the Afghan Taliban, others are allies of the Taliban regime. The book also examines the efforts of regional and extra-regional countries to develop a comprehensive approach to Afghanistan’s challenges, offering policy recommendations for China to lead regional efforts in economic, security, and trade domains.



▲ Nian Peng and Khalid Rahman(2024), *The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry*, Singapore: Springer Nature.

Chapter one serves as the introduction to the book. In Chapter two written by Azam assesses five major reasons for the failure of the Afghan peace process, including ideological divisions, the presence of foreign forces, the engagement of multiple actors, spoilers, and a trust deficit (pp. 12–27). On (p. 15) Azam argues that Pakistan fulfilled its promises to the U.S. in negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban in Doha. Azam further contends that the self-assurance of a military victory diminished the chances for negotiations and a political settlement. Similarly, in Chapter two, the author draws a strong comparison between Iraq, Vietnam, and Afghanistan, noting that the Afghan Taliban are seen as Islamist and authoritarian, unwilling to share power or recognize Afghanistan as a democratic and pluralistic society, and failing to adopt an inclusive structure that represents all Afghans. Azam argues that democracy significantly diverges from the Pashtunwali and Islamism of the Taliban. This view contrasts with other scholars who regard Pashtunwali, particularly the Jirga system, as embodying democratic values (e.g. the 2002–2019 Jirgas in Afghanistan, which contributed to the establishment of Afghan constitution in 2004).

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These scholars believe that the Taliban's ideology is more inherently Islamist and less influenced by Pashtun values. Also, in Chapter two, Azam emphasizes the role of criminality, corruption, and mafias within the Afghan republic, which bolstered the Taliban's opposition by portraying the Afghan republic as entirely dependent on the West and a puppet of foreign powers and lacks credibility for delivery security to Afghan public. On (p. 20), Azam rightly points out the American failure, noting that their extra-judicial killings in Afghanistan allowed the Taliban to seize the opportunity to gain more support from the rural population. American objectives in Afghanistan extended beyond military goals to include securing energy interests in Central Asia and allying with India in South Asia. Multiple actors were involved in the Afghan negotiations, including the Afghan government, US-NATO, and the Taliban, each with their own strategic objectives, preventing a unified approach. The clashes among various state actors further fueled the war in Afghanistan, with each pursuing competing interests. For instance, the US, China-Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia-Qatar, and India and Pakistan all vied for influence in the country, seeking outcomes that were entirely exclusive.

As Azam argues, 'Afghanistan became one of the worst victims of geography and geopolitics'. The trust deficit among warring parties has been a significant barrier in negotiations. Major foreign actors engaged in Afghanistan, including the US-NATO, Pakistan-India, Afghanistan and China, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Pakistan-US, and Iran and Saudi Arabia, all suffered from mutual distrust. This lack of trust paralyzed the peace process, where Afghans played a lesser role compared to regional countries and the US. The Americans never trusted the Taliban due to their close ties with Al-Qaeda, and similarly, they did not trust the Afghan republic. The US had its own approach to the conflict, which was to withdraw as soon as possible and abandon Afghanistan, reminiscent of their actions during the Soviet Union's disintegration in the 1990s, leaving the country to various warlords who fought in a civil war. The Taliban had no intention of sharing power with the Afghan republic or any third party in Afghanistan, aiming instead to seize control entirely.

Chapter three of the book delves into the challenges confronting the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban's governance and social order are weakened by their lack of constitutional legitimacy,

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which impedes ordinary Afghans, particularly the youth, from pursuing progress and development. The Taliban are characterized as an ideological and religious-political entity that is incompatible with the modern democratic political systems of the contemporary world. Additionally, Chapter three notes that the Taliban have made no attempts to convene a Jirga for the formulation of a constitution or any other national-level mechanism. The exclusion of non-Taliban individuals from the system remains a major issue, with hardliners staunchly opposing the freedom and political participation of non-Taliban Afghans. This chapter also underscores the Taliban's human rights violations, particularly in restricting girls' and women's rights to education and employment. These violations remain a critical issue and a source of pressure on the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the author recommends that the Taliban regime address these human rights issues to gain the confidence of the majority of Afghan people and the international community.

On the security and terrorism, the chapter delves into Taliban strong amity with the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) also known as Daesh. However, the Taliban are somehow unclear on their connection with the Al-Qaeda that has historical ties with the Taliban especially its founder Osama Bin Laden. Meanwhile, neighboring states including Pakistan, China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have serious observations on the terrorism and terror outfits, especially Tehreek-e-Taliban, East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other regional groups. While the author has rightly point out these threats present to the regional countries. However, it has delimited the counter-terrorism assistance (Weapons and technology) to the Taliban and close cooperation with the Taliban regime on these terrorists' threats. It's important to note that Taliban will not target groups that were their allies against US-NATO and Afghan republic as they would be inviting problems for their governance and security in the country. At the same time the Taliban have reiterated that they will not allow any terror groups to threaten regional countries from Afghan soil.

On (p. 38), the authors argue that the US prohibited transactions to Afghanistan through banks due to objections to designated Taliban figures in the top management of the Da Afghanistan Bank (Central Bank of Afghanistan), measures which have had a crippling effect on the Afghan

economy. Despite this, the Taliban regime has not been formally recognized by any state in the world. For better economic performance and socio-economic development, the recognition of the Afghan government would be crucial. This could potentially boost regional transit trade arrangements and connectivity projects such as the CPEC extension, TAPI, CASA-1000, Trans-Afghan Railways (Pakistan-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan), and other critical projects.

On (p. 40), the authors argue that as the Taliban insurgency grew and intensified over the years, the Taliban developed linkages and shared resources with other militant and terrorist groups, particularly those aligned with their goal of ending the presence of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan. The authors further states that ISK fighters established sanctuaries in various Afghan provinces, especially those bordering Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian countries. However, the author has not provided substantial sources for this assertion. Islamic State Khorasan has no territorial control in Afghanistan, and their sleeper cells have been consistently targeted by the Taliban. While ISKP remains a threat not only to Afghanistan but also to regional countries, addressing this issue will require a regional approach.

The chapter also highlights the formation of the TTP and its relations with the Afghan Taliban. The author incorrectly suggests a close linkage between Islamic State Khorasan and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), as the former is considered a foe by the latter. Both the Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan Taliban have stated that Islamic State Khorasan is Khawariji (dissenter) in Islam. Both the Afghan/ Pakistani Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan struggle for operational capability and recruitment. While the Afghan Taliban run a state, TTP recruitment has been higher compared to Islamic State Khorasan along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The issue of the TTP, with Pakistan accusing the Afghan Taliban of providing shelter to the group, has strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. While Pakistan has asked the Afghan Taliban to take military action against the TTP in Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban have instead relocated TTP members to other parts of the country (p. 43).

It is important to note that military action against the TTP by the Afghan Taliban could strengthen the ranks of ISK, as many Afghans and Pakistani Taliban members might join Islamic

State Khorasan, potentially embroiling Afghanistan in a civil war that would impact the entire region, including Pakistan. In this context, the Taliban are acting as rational actors, seeking to avoid new conflicts and the onset of another civil war, given Afghanistan's long history of conflict. The Taliban regime has consistently encouraged the Pakistani government to engage in dialogue with the TTP. On one occasion, the Afghan Taliban even mediated talks between the TTP and the Pakistani government.

The authors also highlight the issue of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which is considered a threat to China's autonomous region of Xinjiang. China's approach to addressing the ETIM in Afghanistan has been cautious, pragmatic, and gradual. China aims to prevent both India and the US from reestablishing their presence in Afghanistan as they did before 2021, using it against China. China perceives that instability in Afghanistan could jeopardize its investment projects in the region, as an unstable Afghanistan could become a haven for anti-China forces. The authors do not compare the approaches of China and Pakistan regarding the Taliban, noting only that China's approach to the ETIM issue is more realistic than Pakistan's approach to the TTP.

This chapter on the terrorism threat to regional countries is somewhat ambiguous and does not provide a comprehensive analysis from the viewpoints of Afghan scholars. While the authors label many terrorist groups as present in Afghanistan and threatening regional countries, they limit the discussion on counter-terrorism assistance to the Taliban in targeting these groups in a manner that avoids descending Afghanistan into a new civil war. The issue of terrorism in the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan is complex, and regional countries have failed to come up with credible solutions. Although the Afghan Taliban remain ideologically friendly to Al-Qaeda and other terror groups, it is evident that they have learned lessons from the 1990s and will not allow these groups to freely operate in Afghanistan.

Chapter four, written by Yu Hong Fu, analyzes the non-traditional security threats present in South Asia as a result of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. These threats have the potential to spill over into other countries, especially in Central and South Asia. The chapter highlights

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that Afghanistan's geographical location and prolonged conflict with both domestic and foreign actors have deeply affected surrounding areas. The return of the Afghan Taliban to power in Afghanistan is expected to result in cross-regional linkage effects, with academic and policy circles concentrating on issues of terrorism and geopolitics. Specifically, there is concern about the impacts of the Afghan Taliban's return on transnational terrorism, the reactions of key foreign countries to the new Taliban regime, and the international community's success in urging the Afghan Taliban to adopt more flexible and pragmatic policies.

This chapter also delves into the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) as a threat to Afghanistan and regional countries, particularly with their global caliphate dismantled in Iraq and Syria, and their struggles to recruit members in fragile countries such as Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda has historically maintained a friendly relationship with the Taliban, and vice versa. This argument is supported by the killing of Zawahiri in Kabul by US operations termed 'over the horizon'. Terrorism scholars widely noted that Al-Qaeda began pursuing more limited strategic goals, emphasizing localism and incrementalism, an approach commonly referred to as 'controlled pragmatism' and 'strategic patience'. However, this chapter does not provide substantial policy recommendations to effectively engage the Taliban in overcoming these security and terrorism threats.

In Chapter five of the book, Hamid Nasri assesses the post-9/11 objectives and the consistently failing policies of the US-led NATO in Afghanistan. Over the past two decades, the United States expended over a trillion dollars in an overt effort to nation-build in Afghanistan, establish national institutions, counter insurgents, stabilize electoral politics, uphold human rights, and prevent the Taliban from regaining control of Kabul. However, the covert objectives of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan included increasing its influence in the South Asian region, maintaining control over the strategic 'Cockpit of Asia', monitoring resurgent Russia, the 'rogue' state of Iran, and nuclear-armed Pakistan, as well as encircling the rising power of China.

In Chapter six, Xin Yi Qu and Nian Peng analyze the extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to Afghanistan, considering it advantageous not only to Afghanistan but also to China and Pakistan. However, they note that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship

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project of BRI, faces obstacles in implementing projects and establishing a safe investment environment in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In Chapter seven, Najimdeen Bakare analyzes the Russian engagement with Afghanistan from a theoretical framework, considering historical perspectives such as the withdrawal of the Soviet Union and their recent interactions with the Afghan Taliban. This chapter addresses critical questions including the primary considerations of Russia's policy towards Afghanistan, the evolution of this policy since 2001, Russia's strategy for engaging with the new Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and whether neighboring countries like Pakistan should exercise caution regarding Russia's renewed interest in Afghanistan.

Chapter eight, written by Muneeb Yousuf and Nazir Ahmad Mir, provides an overview of India's engagement with Afghanistan before and after 9/11, as well as the Taliban's reemergence in the country. The U.S. removal of the Taliban opened a political space for India to reengage in Afghanistan and participate in post-Taliban state-building efforts. Over the years, India has employed a soft power approach through developmental projects in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's resurgence, supported by Pakistan, has once again challenged India's interests in the region. The subsequent U.S. withdrawal in 2021 and the Taliban's return, backed by Pakistan, have raised significant security concerns for India. This 5 chapter also assesses whether there have been any changes in the Taliban's policies.

In Chapter nine, Khalid Rahman explores Pakistan's relationship with the U.S. after 9/11 and the emergence of new threats. Pakistan faced challenging policy decisions. Cooperation with the U.S. in its war in Afghanistan—a neighboring country with which Pakistan shared historical, religious, cultural, and ethnic ties—was fraught with risks due to the global context and Pakistan's political and economic constraints. Total opposition to the U.S. or remaining neutral was also deemed imprudent for similar reasons. Consequently, Islamabad chose to ally with the U.S., but the nature and scope of this cooperation continually shifted due to various push and pull factors that emerged during the war. This alliance was fraught with difficulties and was never smooth. This chapter examines the foreign policy challenges Islamabad confronted in the post-9/11 era,

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considering the ambiguous objectives of the war. It also evaluates the prolonged U.S. war and categorizes the cooperation between the U.S. and Pakistan into six distinct phases.

Chapter ten, authored by Hideaki Shinoda, focuses on Japan's assistance to Afghanistan in the post-9/11 era and after the Taliban regained power. Japan's policy positioned it as one of the top financial donors to Afghanistan after 2001. Japan has been deeply engaged in the 'reconstruction' of Afghanistan through initiatives such as Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), the 'Ogata Initiatives', and the development of 'Ring Roads', particularly in the early stages of reconstruction. However, the sentiment towards Afghanistan after 2021 is likely to negatively impact Japan's overall commitment to international peace-building efforts. The perception that Japan may lack a clear policy guideline for effective peace-building activities continues to create anxieties among those involved with conflict-prone countries. Afghanistan holds significant importance for Japan, and a critical question after the fall of Kabul in 2021 is whether Japan can afford to resume its readiness to contribute to international peace-building efforts in the near future. The book concludes by providing a comprehensive analysis of the conditions in Afghanistan related to terrorism, economic development, security, and the regional approach and great power rivalry.

Ihsanullah Omarkhail, Book Review: The uncertain future of Afghanistan: terrorism, reconstruction, and great-power rivalry, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2024.2374984>.(<http://www.rcas.top/Paper/216.html>)

RCAS Paper

Book Review: The uncertain future of Afghanistan: terrorism, reconstruction, and great-power rivalry, JHEDS

RCAS, Jul. 14, 2024

The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan. Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry is an interesting book that comprises ten chapters and in the first one, the editors introduced the remaining nine chapters. Experts from different regions with rich and current data threw light on the future of Afghanistan in a well-organized manner. It is an exciting voyage of understanding the enigma that is Afghanistan. It is an enriching narrative of the push and pull factors that influenced political developments in Afghanistan in the 21st century. After the withdrawal, the US imposed economic sanctions to pressure the Taliban for concessions and also engaged them to prevent Afghanistan from swinging to China. India lost much of its influence in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. In September 2023, China became the first country to formally name a new ambassador to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. The book has analyzed the domestic politics and perspectives on the foreign relations of Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Journal of Higher Education and Development Studies (JHEDS)

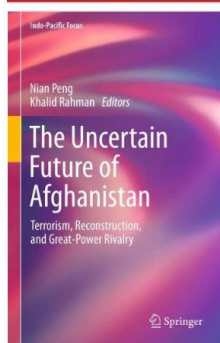
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BOOK REVIEW

OPEN ACCESS



The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan

Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry

Editors: Prof. Nian Peng, Khalid Rahman

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- **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-2409-3>
- **Publisher:** Springer Singapore
- **eBook ISBN:** 978-981-97-2409-3 (Published: 13 June 2024)
- **Edition Number:** 1
- **Number of Pages:** IX, 204

Reviewed by: Prof. Dr. Zahid Anwar, Director, PDRE, Pakistan. Email: director@pdre.com.pk

▲Zahid Anwar(2024), Book Review: The uncertain future of Afghanistan: terrorism, reconstruction, and great-power rivalry, *Journal of Higher Education and Development Studies (JHEDS)*, <https://jheds.pdf.org.pk/index.php/jheds/article/view/68/71>.

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Azam delineates the ups and downs of Afghanistan's peace negotiations in the 21st century and identifies several factors such as ideological divides, the presence of foreign forces, trust deficit, and the diversity of actors and spoilers that doomed the peaceful settlement of Afghanistan's imbroglio. The author says that efforts for peace and reconciliation started at least as early as 2005 when the German intelligence service and the British established contacts with the Afghan Taliban. Eventually, the Doha Accord was signed on 29th February 2020 nevertheless it neither paved the way for the honorable exit of NATO nor saved the US-supported Government of Ashraf Ghani.

Mansoor and Tahir tackled the issue of the Taliban's challenges after regaining control of Afghanistan in 2021 and highlighted the foreign policy priority areas of the interim government. The chapter reviews the level of threat due to the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan. It also brings to the limelight the efforts of Afghanistan under the Taliban to create conducive conditions for a focus on economic growth, trade, transit, and infrastructure for promoting regional economic integration and connectivity that can bring lasting stability to Afghanistan. The authors opine that the proactive role of China will gradually increase stability in Afghanistan and prepare the ground for mega investments in connectivity projects under the BRI and by other global and regional investors.

Fu deals with Afghanistan under Taliban rule, focusing on security threats and regional response. After regaining control in 2021, the Afghan Taliban continued to crack down on hostile armed groups inside Afghanistan. It also throws light on the pragmatic approach of China towards the de facto Taliban government in Afghanistan. China's most important interest in Afghanistan is to ensure security and stability. In addition to preventing terrorism from spreading to Xinjiang, China prefers to view Afghanistan through the prism of regional connectivity. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) focuses on strengthening economic ties and improving connectivity with Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe. Besides, it agreed at the end of 2017 to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan. In the end, Fu opines that key foreign countries have long-term common interests in the stability of Afghanistan and that the Afghan Taliban is currently the only indigenous force capable of bringing stability to Afghanistan.

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Nasri collected relevant data to augment his viewpoint on the issue of US post-9/11 objectives and policy in Afghanistan. The US launched a war on terror and attacked Afghanistan on October 07, 2001, and left Afghanistan in September 2021. Overtly the US tried to ‘build’ an Afghan nation, develop national institutions, counter the insurgents, smoothen electoral politics, ensure respect for human rights, and not allow the Taliban to get control of Afghanistan again. Nevertheless, the covert objectives of the US’s presence in Afghanistan were to enhance influence in the South Asian region, control the ‘Cockpit of Asia’, keep an eye on resurgent Russia, the ‘rogue’ state of Iran, nuclear-armed Pakistan and encircle rising China. Nasri concludes that the US has failed to achieve its overt or covert goals during its occupation of Afghanistan.

Qu and Peng in Chapter 6 analyzed China-Afghanistan Relations and the BRI with a focus on progress, challenges, and prospects. The Taliban after regaining power in Afghanistan tried to strengthen relations with China. After the US withdrew, China deepened its engagement with Afghanistan at various levels. Through participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Taliban aimed to strengthen Afghanistan’s economic and social progress. China safeguards its substantial investments and infrastructure projects associated with the CPEC in Pakistan. Afghanistan’s support of the BRI ensures the stable development of both the BRI and the CPEC. China regards Afghanistan as a crucial piece of the larger puzzle that connects the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia. The authors conclude that the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan could be advantageous for both China and Afghanistan as part of the BRI.

Bakare in Chapter 7 discussed Russia’s engagement in Afghanistan pre- and post-2001. The NATO invasion of Afghanistan renewed Russia’s strategic interests in the region. The author explains how the United States succumbed to strategic fatigue / hegemonic overstretch. Bakare delineates Russia’s Afghan policy through Russia’s NSS and FPCR documents. Afghanistan is paramount to Russia’s geostrategic positioning. The chapter concludes that Russia does not pose any form of immediate or direct threat to the region's security; instead, the regional players stand to gain from cooperating with Moscow.

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Yousuf and Mir explain India-Afghanistan Relations and the Return of the Taliban in chapter 8. India's policy towards Afghanistan is analyzed in light of developments in the post-NATO invasion of Afghanistan. India got space in Afghanistan when NATO occupied Afghanistan in 2001. Given the past policy of the Taliban toward India, the return of the group remained a challenge for India.

K. Rahman objectively analyzed Pakistan's Policy towards Afghanistan after the NATO invasion. It tackled the issue in a very organized way and elaborated on how Pakistan adjusted its policy in the context of global and regional developments. In the wake of the 9/11 incident, Pakistan faced hard policy choices. Islamabad became a US ally, but this cooperation was considerably influenced by the push and pull factors arising during the war. The chapter categorizes the cooperation between the US and Pakistan into six phases and looks at the chaotic endgame in Afghanistan, the challenges faced by the Taliban government, and policy options for Pakistan in the rapidly changing scenario.

In the last chapter, Shinoda analyzed Japan's Policy Towards Afghanistan since 2001. Japan's involvement in Afghanistan was outstanding in its history of overseas assistance. Japan is intensively engaged in the "reconstruction" of Afghanistan through Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), Ogata Initiatives, and Ring Roads. The author says that Japan would have to find its role in a very modest manner after the harsh lesson in Afghanistan. Since Japan has lost ambitious goals in Afghanistan, it will opt for more realistic approaches to crises in the future.

The book is full of current and relevant data about the crisis in Afghanistan. It discussed the issue in the light of national interests of different countries. There are typos for instance on page 109 Sar-i-pul is written as Sarpur province. The rich data and objective analysis make the book a must-read for understanding contemporary Afghanistan.

Zahid Anwar(2024), Book Review: The uncertain future of Afghanistan: terrorism, reconstruction, and great-power rivalry, *Journal of Higher Education and Development Studies*

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(*JHEDS*),

<https://jheds.pedf.org.pk/index.php/jheds/article/view/68/71>(<http://www.rcas.top/Paper/223.html>)

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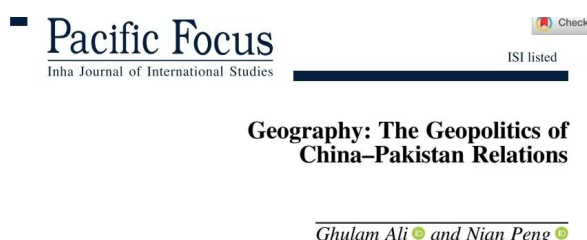
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RCAS Paper

RCAS New Journal Article is Published by Pacific Focus!

RCAS, Nov. 22, 2024

RCAS is proud to announce that the new Journal article-*Geography: The Geopolitics of China–Pakistan Relations* is published by *Pacific Focus* (SSCI-indexed Journal) in November 2024. Ghulam Ali, Deputy Director of RCAS, and Nian Peng, Director of RCAS, co-authored this article.



This article argues that Pakistan's strategic location provides a strong foundation for the durability of its relations with China. In support of this claim, it assesses the impact of other key factors, including the "Indian factor," in this bilateral relationship. The article illustrates Pakistan's "advantageous" location compared to China's inherent geographical limitations. The Chinese elite realized geographical realities from the beginning and pursued a long-term partnership with Pakistan. This was evident from China's investment in megaprojects in Pakistan, which were all premised on geography. Pakistan's geographical location has served China's interests in various ways, including breaking China's encirclement, acting as a gateway to the outside world, and preventing the infiltration of militancy into the mainland during the Cold War. Pakistan can potentially act as a hub between China and other regional countries in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. The article diverts emphasis from the "Indian factor" to enduring geographical conditions as the basis for the durable Beijing–Islamabad partnership.

Key words: China–Pakistan, CPEC, BRI, Geopolitics, Indian Ocean.

Introduction

For decades, China and Pakistan have maintained a durable relationship. This durability is particularly impressive considering the lack of shared history, socio-political systems, cultures, and ideologies between the two countries. What are the key factors that support the longstanding "all-weather" friendship between China and Pakistan? While existing literature focuses on the role of the Indian factor, this article argues that Pakistan's advantageous geostrategic location and China's inherent geographical constraints provide a solid foundation for this relationship. Pakistan is situated at the crossroads of significant regions in Central, South, and West Asia, as well as the Middle East. It also has a long coastline that borders important sea lanes of communication (SLOC). Additionally, Pakistan shares a border with China's underdeveloped western region, which is

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▲ Ghulam Ali&Nian Peng(2024), *Geography: The Geopolitics of China – Pakistan Relations*, *Pacific Focus*(SSCI), <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12267>.

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This article argues that Pakistan's strategic location provides a strong foundation for the durability of its relations with China. In support of this claim, it assesses the impact of other key factors, including the "Indian factor," in this bilateral relationship. The article illustrates Pakistan's "advantageous" location compared to China's inherent geographical limitations. The Chinese elite realized geographical realities from the beginning and pursued a long-term partnership with Pakistan. This was evident from China's investment in megaprojects in Pakistan, which were all premised on geography. Pakistan's geographical location has served China's interests in various ways, including breaking China's encirclement, acting as a gateway to the outside world, and preventing the infiltration of militancy into the mainland during the Cold War. Pakistan can potentially act as a hub between China and other regional countries in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. The article diverts emphasis from the "Indian factor" to enduring geographical conditions as the basis for the durable Beijing–Islamabad partnership.

Ghulam Ali&Nian Peng(2024), Geography: The Geopolitics of China-Pakistan Relations, *Pacific Focus*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12267>.
(<http://www.rcas.top/event/259.html>)

RCAS Commentary

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

Nian Peng, Jan. 2, 2024

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.

The article was first published at South China Morning Post, Hong Kong, Jan.1, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3246759/south-china-sea-return-dialogue-vital-china-philippines-ties>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/167.html>)

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RCAS Commentary

Marcos' New Code of Conduct for the South China Sea Is A Non-starter

Nian Peng, Jan.2, 2024

On 20 November 2023, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr claimed that the Philippines had approached neighbours such as Vietnam and Malaysia to craft a separate ‘code of conduct’ (COC) in the South China Sea (SCS).



▲Filipino President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. attends the closing ceremony of the 40th and 41st Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit and Related Summits in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on Sunday (Nov. 13, 2022). Marcos said the need for Code of Conduct in the South China Sea is becoming “more urgent.” (Photo courtesy of Bongbong Marcos Facebook page).

Speaking in Honolulu, Marcos said, ‘We are now in the midst of negotiating our own code of conduct, for example, with Vietnam because we are still waiting for the code of conduct between China and ASEAN and the progress has been rather slow unfortunately’. He also said that Vietnam and Malaysia were among the Southeast Asian nations with which he was trying to negotiate a code of conduct to maintain peace in the SCS.

This is not the first time that Marcos has called for the COC negotiations with the Philippines’ neighbours to be pushed forward. During the 40th and 41st ASEAN summits and related summits in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on 11 November 2022, he said there was an ‘urgent need’ for the COC but did not propose creating a separate COC.

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Manila is endeavouring to form alignment with its neighbours within the COC consultation process, leveraging their collective influence to oppose clauses that are advantageous to China. It also attempted to assert pressure on China to make concessions through threatening to lead a separate COC. The Philippines also aims to involve Vietnam and Malaysia in its fight against China in the SCS to strengthen its bargaining position. Through collaboration with other claimants, the Philippines also intends to stop China from taking aggressive actions in the SCS.

But Vietnam and Malaysia are unlikely to follow Marcos' suggestions of crafting a separate COC. Despite Vietnam's collaboration with the Philippines on the South China Sea Arbitration, it has not yet formally filed its case with the Hague Tribunal. Vietnam has not endorsed Marcos' suggestion, though Hanoi differs in opinion from China in the COC consultation.

Unlike the Philippines, Vietnam has no intention of provoking China in the SCS. Instead, it prefers to adopt a diplomatic way to carefully managing its territorial disputes with China without undermining bilateral relations. In June 2023, the Vietnamese government cooled its maritime standoff with Chinese coast guard vessels in Wan'an Bank. Vietnam is unlikely to join the Philippines' anti-China camp.

Malaysia has historically maintained a nonconfrontational approach to SCS disputes. Despite tensions in the SCS, the Malaysian government has consistently stressed a diplomatic solution. Since President Anwar Ibrahim assumed office in November 2022, Malaysia has maintained an even closer relationship with China. The warmth in China–Malaysia relations is evident in the frequency of high-level contacts, such as President Anwar's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing in March 2023 and the deepened cooperation on Belt and Road Initiative projects.

According to a survey conducted by the Merdeka Center on 22 November 2023, the Malaysian public is more concerned about the economic performance of the new government led by Anwar Ibrahim than its geopolitical manoeuvring. The top priority of the Anwar administration is economic growth rather than destabilising the SCS.

Both Vietnam and Malaysia were among the six participating countries in China-led maritime exercise that kicked off on 13 November 2023 in Zhanjiang, the headquarters of the Chinese navy's South Sea Fleet. The objective of the exercise, code-named Peace and Friendship-2023, was to enhance mutual trust and cooperation to jointly safeguard regional peace and stability. It is clear that the majority of Southeast Asian nations and China are committed to maintaining peace and stability in the SCS.

Shortly after Marcos' claims of crafting a new 'code of conduct', Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning warned that 'any departure from the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea framework and its spirit will be null and void'. This not only signalled China's opposition to Marcos' suggestions but also demonstrated Beijing's resolve to prevent the Philippines from disturbing the COC consultation process.

Marcos' assertions regarding the development of a new code of conduct will not only fail to garner support from neighbouring countries but will also erode any tenuous trust that may have been forged between the Philippines and China during the brief discussions conducted between Marcos and Xi at the APEC Summit in November 2023.

The article was first published at East Asia Forum, Australia, Jan.2, 2024, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2024/01/02/marcos-new-code-of-conduct-for-the-south-china-sea-is-a-non-starter/>.(<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/168.html>)

RCAS Commentary

Chinese Yuan Gains Currency in the Gulf States

Ghulam Ali, Jan.17, 2024

China's pursuit of internationalising the yuan, currency swaps, e-currency, cross-border deals and digitalised currency have recently made international news. These efforts are mainly on the rise with Gulf states.



▲ A clerk counts renminbi banknotes in Hai'an city in eastern China's Jiangsu province. AP

On 28 November 2023, the People's Bank of China and the Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates renewed their currency swap agreement worth US\$4.89 billion for five years. Both banks also signed a memorandum of understanding to enhance collaboration in digital currency development.

Meanwhile, the Dubai Financial Market, in collaboration with Nasdaq Dubai and the Shanghai Stock Exchange, signed a memorandum of understanding covering various areas of digital financial cooperation. China-UAE currency swap started in 2012, and in March 2023, the two sides made the first-ever purchase of liquified natural gas in yuan.

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On 20 November 2023, the People's Bank of China and the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority signed a currency swap of US\$6.98 billion for three years. In a separate development, Saudi companies were listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. Saudi Arabia is in active talks with Beijing to price some of its oil sales in Chinese yuan, a move that would dent the US dollar's dominance in the global petroleum market and mark another shift by the world's top crude exporter towards Asia.

China also has a currency swap agreement with Qatar. In addition to currency swaps, China has signed cross-border trade settlement arrangements with all six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and has established yuan clearing centres in different cities. These measures could make the yuan a trade invoicing currency, reduce cumbersome processes and costs and create a pool of liquidity in the yuan.

The growing financial cooperation between China and Gulf Cooperation Council states is not unexpected. It is the result of steady, systematic growth over a decade and confirms deepening bilateral relations. Both sides have placed a significant premium on the digitalisation of their finances. They are taking measures to create greater space and avoid US sanctions. The Gulf region, especially the United Arab Emirates, has positioned itself as a global financial hub and is drawing investments towards it. Saudi Arabia is also striving to catch up quickly.

From the Chinese side, the Belt and Road Initiative and its energy needs pushed it towards the Gulf Cooperation Council. The Belt and Road Initiative's Action Plan stresses financial connectivity, the internationalisation of the yuan, cross-border payment agreements, financial integration and the incorporation of the yuan in the International Monetary Fund's Special Drawing Rights basket of currencies. China achieved this milestone in 2016.

In line with these goals, China launched the Yuan Cross-Border Interbank Payment System in 2015, providing a stable platform service for cross-border yuan settlement. By early 2023, this payment system boasts 1366 participants from 109 countries and regions. Additionally, the People's Bank of China has entered into currency swap agreements with the central banks or monetary authorities of 29 countries.

China initiated efforts to internationalise the yuan in 2004 and started financial cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council a decade later. In 2013, during his meeting with the King of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasised the need for closer cooperation with Gulf countries. Xi reiterated this during his speech at the Arab League headquarters in 2016. Acting upon Xi's guidelines, Chinese banks and financial institutions expanded their presence, cross-border financial transactions and activities in the Gulf region.

As a result, Chinese banks have more than doubled their balance sheets in the Dubai International Financial Centre since mid-2014. By 2018, their total assets accounted for nearly a quarter of the financial centre's assets. And Chinese financial entities have upgraded their licenses from subsidiary to branch status in the Dubai International Finance Centre.

Though these deals are moderate in volume, they demonstrate China's growing ties with the region. Beijing has institutional mechanisms with the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are set to join the China-and-Russia-led BRICS in early 2024. They are also dialogue partners of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, with the possibility of achieving full member status in the future.

These financial agreements between China and the Gulf Cooperation Council hold great potential. They could reduce the duration and cost of transactions, mitigate risks, enhance resilience against financial crises, expand market access, promote bilateral trade and facilitate regional integration. They may serve as catalysts, encouraging other Middle Eastern countries to engage in similar deals with China.

Saudi Arabia-as one of the primary oil exporters to China-may consider adopting the yuan for oil trade in the long term, reducing dependence on the dollar. These deals will strengthen bilateral relations and indicate a shift from the petrodollar to the 'petroyuan', albeit over an extended timeframe.

The article was first published at East Asia Forum, Australia, Jan.17, 2024, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2024/01/17/2444504/>.(<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/169.html>)

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RCAS Commentary

Philippine President Marcos Jr's visit to Vietnam: Creating a 'united front' over South China Sea issue?

Nian Peng, Feb.6, 2024

On 29 January, almost two months after the call for a separate South China Sea (SCS) code of conduct (COC) with ASEAN members, Philippine President Marcos Jr initiated his first state visit to Vietnam. Reportedly, both sides signed agreements to prevent untoward incidents in the SCS and to broaden cooperation between their coast guards.



▲ The Philippine's Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr (left) and Vietnam's President Vo Van Thuong (right) attend a welcoming ceremony at the Presidential Palace in Hanoi on 30 January 2024. (Nhac Nguyen/AFP)

According to Marcos, the accord on maritime cooperation “aims to establish a comprehensive partnership between our coast guards on capacity building, training and personnel and ship exchanges to enhance interoperability operations between our two countries”.

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Since the Philippines has sought to build a “united front” with the ASEAN claimant states on challenging China’s claims in the SCS, these agreements might be considered a good start. The Philippines would, therefore, describe them as “great victories”, thus leveraging their ability to garner external and internal support for the Marcos administration.

Giving intra-ASEAN maritime cooperation a boost

Moreover, there is a likelihood of increasing the political will of ASEAN states to promote maritime cooperation. Before Marcos’s Vietnam visit, Indonesian President Joko Widodo visited three claimant states, namely, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei, in January 2024, during which defence cooperation, COC consultations, and trade and investment were the top priorities of discussions. In September of last year, Indonesia conducted its first joint military exercises with its ASEAN neighbours in the SCS.

It is clear that the ASEAN states have expanded their maritime cooperation in the wake of rising tensions in the SCS and intensified competition between China and the US. It seems that the ASEAN states are trying to strengthen their joint capabilities and enhance ASEAN countries’ centrality in hedging against the security risks of great power rivalry in the region. Given ongoing SCS tensions and China-US confrontations, there might be more maritime cooperation between the ASEAN states after Marcos’s state visit to Vietnam.

That said, the significance of Marcos’s Vietnam visit and the agreements on coast guard cooperation should not be overestimated. In fact, coast guard agreements are common among maritime states, especially among SCS claimant states.

For instance, China has signed a coast guard agreement with Vietnam, and the coast guards of the two countries have conducted several joint patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin. China even signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on establishing a joint coast guard committee on maritime cooperation with the Philippine Coast Guard during former President Duterte’s first China tour in October 2016.

Vietnam not necessarily standing with the Philippines

More importantly, Vietnam has taken a very cautious stance on maritime cooperation with the Philippines, as the latter has repeatedly provoked China in the SCS.

In November of the previous year, Vietnam did not overtly respond to Marcos's call for a separate COC. Instead, it agreed to build a shared future for humankind with China and avoided escalating tensions in the SCS.

Therefore, the coast guard agreement with the Philippines does not mean that Vietnam stands with the Philippines on the SCS disputes or shows support for Marcos's hawkish SCS policy. It is actually an element of Vietnam's balancing act in the SCS; that is, it is expanding maritime cooperation with all the partners, including the claimant states, to enhance its maritime capability without provoking China.

In addition, the main function of the maritime cooperation agreement is to manage the fishing activities of the two countries, as Vietnamese fishing boats usually enter waters claimed by the Philippines as part of its exclusive economic zone.

Different objectives from the Code of Conduct

Although analysts believed that the top leaders of the Philippines and Vietnam included the COC consultations, no bilateral COC agreement was released during the visit.

The two countries have different focuses on the COC. The Philippines mainly focuses on Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands), while Vietnam prefers to protect its interest on Paracel Islands (Xisha Islands).

Furthermore, the Philippines welcomes the deep involvement of external actors, particularly the US, in the COC consultations process, while Vietnam is worried about the escalated tensions in the SCS, especially those brought about by external actors.

No 'united front' against China

Even so, Marcos suggested submitting a joint proposal on the limits of the continental shelves of coastal states to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) at the UN, in

which he stated “The Philippines is willing to work with Vietnam for a joint submission at the appropriate time.” However, he did not receive a clear response from Vietnam.

In 2009, Vietnam and Malaysia made a joint submission to the CLCS on “information on the limits of the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured in respect of the southern part of the South China Sea”. However, they failed to obtain approval from the CLCS due to China’s opposition. Since then, there have been no joint submissions.

Given that China has consistently indicated that any form of “ganging up” by Southeast Asian claimants would be considered a hostile act by Beijing and met with strong dissatisfaction, it is unlikely that Vietnam will support the Philippines’ proposal for a joint submission to the CLCS.

Overall, Marcos’ s state visit to Vietnam and the positive outcomes of maritime cooperation could be regarded as successful, but the visit would not be able to generate joint actions or a “united front” against China.

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RCAS Commentary

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

Nian Peng, Feb.10, 2024

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.

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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 Jnr 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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RCAS Commentary

Durand Line: A Perpetual Bone of Contention between Pakistan and Afghanistan

Mairaj ul Hamid Nasri, Feb.21, 2024

Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanakzai; the Deputy Foreign Minister of Afghanistan and the then top interlocuter of Taliban during Afghan Peace Process, pronounced that “Afghanistan will never accept Durand Line as permanent official border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.” He made this announcement while addressing a huge gathering for commemorating 35th anniversary of withdrawal of Soviet Union from Afghanistan in Logar province of Afghanistan.



▲ The Durand Line is the 2,640-kilometer (1,640-mile) border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. (National Geographic)

While responding to the claim made by Mr. Stanzakzai, Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry has rejected his statement and stated that it is a “Self-serving and fanciful claim because the legitimacy and

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sanctity of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border are firmly grounded in Geography, History and International Law.”

Pakistan and Afghanistan both face many issues, that are persistently disturbing their mutually beneficial relationships. Blame Game related to cross border terrorism and irredentist claims have always dominated the news regarding their relationships. Regardless of the government system in Afghanistan, border management and legality of the border has time and again brought both the countries at bull’s eyes situations. Pakistan has been facing cross border terrorism and infiltration since the NATO invasion that has augmented the instability inside Pakistan. Although, Pakistan covered majority of the border with barbed wire, yet due to hard mountainous terrain it becomes impossible to cover the whole border. Thus, the blame game between the two states remains intact.

Since Pakistan’s independence in 1947, Durand Line-the internationally recognized border between Pakistan and Afghanistan-has been a point of tension in their ties. Even though both Afghanistan and British India, the two states at the time, had mutually agreed to, but Afghanistan refused to recognize Pakistan, because of this border. But because of incorrect information and a misinterpretation of the relevant document, this problem persists.

The majority of Afghans think that this agreement was only intended to last for a century. In the event that this was accurate, the contract would have ended in 1993. The prominent members of the mainstream in Afghanistan are likewise unwilling to dispute this fact. However, no explicit evidence or testimony has yet been provided by the Afghan government or the activists to support their claims.

But initially, the agreement’s legality was limited to the lives of the Afghan kings who approved it. Amir Abdur Rahman and Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, the British India's foreign secretary, initially signed the pact in 1893. Following Abdur Rahman's demise, Sir Louis Dane and his son King Habibullah Khan signed the accord when they subsequently came in Kabul in 1904 carrying the draft of a new one. March 21, 1905, saw the signing of the “Dane-Habibullah agreement” between the two states. This arrangement lasted until 1919, when the Third Anglo-Afghan War broke out.

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On August 8, 1919, after the Anglo-Afghan War, Afghan Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Khan signed a “peace agreement between Great Britain and Afghanistan” in Rawalpindi with a peace delegation. “The Afghan Government accepts the Indo-Afghan Frontier accepted by the late Emir” (Habibullah Khan), according to Article 5 of this treaty.

Thus, the King released the Durand Line from any personal undertaking for the first time. On November 22, 1921, the “Kabul Agreement” reaffirmed this understanding. As to the Rawalpindi agreement of 1919, Article 8, the “Respective Parties recognize the Indian Afghan Border.

Moreover, on July 30, 1930, King Nadir Khan approved the agreements with the British Government via a diplomatic instrument. “I am proud to officially confess that our position about both the agreements [the 1919 agreement and the June 1923 trade agreement] enjoy complete validity and are enforceable with full force,” the statement reads.

At a later meeting with the British Secretary of Foreign Affairs on July 31, 1947, Afghan Prime Minister Shah Mehmood Khan proclaimed that all border agreements between the Afghan and British governments would be void upon the former’s abdication of control over British India. As a result, the border dispute caused Pak-Afghan relations to deteriorate from the moment of its foundation. Since then, Afghan consulates and embassies have made a concerted effort to spread this official perspective throughout the globe.

International law, however, disagrees with the Afghan government’s position. The Vienna Convention on the Succession of States in Respect of Treaties (VCSST) of 1978 addresses state succession difficulties on a global scale. Once this treaty was ratified by a large number of states, it came into effect in 1996. “Succession of states cannot impact international borders agreed upon as a result of an agreement and rights and obligations concerning international borders created through an agreement,” the VCSST’s Article 11 makes very clear. Therefore, the legality of the Border is unaffected by Pakistan’s establishment as the successor to British India.

Pakistan is among the several states that have ratified the Treaty, despite Afghanistan not being a signatory. Furthermore, the VCSST preamble specifies that matters outside of its purview will be resolved in line with international customary law. Since customs are the source of law,

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Afghanistan's position about the Durand Line is nullified in light of Pakistan's existence. Even in the unlikely event that the Parties take this matter to the International Court of Justice, it does not appear that the Afghani position regarding illegitimacy could be validated and supported.

The fact that Afghanistan's borders are shared by countries other than Pakistan is also cause for concern. Without Afghanistan's assistance, these borders were drawn by the Great Powers, namely, Britain and Russia and Britain and Iran. With the exception of the Durand line, which is the only boundary that both states have mutually agreed upon, Afghanistan has not yet questioned the legitimacy of these borders.

With the Taliban's taking control of Kabul administration in August 2021, it was firmly believed that most of the issues including border management, between the countries will be resolved now. But the hopes were in vain, as the Taliban administration is not cooperative as was thought earlier. Cross border attacks have been increased during the last two years and the safe havens of Pakistani militants in Afghanistan are still operating against Pakistan.

Many incidents in this year are reported to have been controlled from Afghanistan. The incident of Peshawar police mosque attacks in January, and D. I Khan incident in December are reportedly controlled from Afghanistan. The militants are operating from Afghan land with full impunity and support of Afghan Taliban that brings Pakistan to a position where it will eventually decide to target the safe havens across the border.

Soon after the D. I Khan incident, Pakistan's army chief visited United States of America with the aim to take US administration into confidence so that American defense mechanism and drone technology present in Afghanistan may be used against the militants' hide outs.

In light of the above facts and figures, it is high time for Afghanistan to accept the reality and embrace the Durand Line as permanent legal border between the countries so that both the states may move ahead for resolving many other issues that are still unresolved. Pakistan is second home for Afghans and in hard times Pakistan has always supported Afghans, so Afghanistan should not turn their second home into an enemy just because of its unjustified claims and hollow jingles.

Mairaj ul Hamid Nasri, “Durand Line: A Perpetual Bone of Contention between Pakistan and Afghanistan”, *RCAS Commentary*, Feb. 21, 2024.(<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/180.html>)

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RCAS Commentary

Saudi-China Relations Growing from Strength to Strength

Ghulam Ali, Mar.14, 2024

In February 2024, Saudi Arabia and China started building an ethylene production facility in China's Fujian province with an investment worth US\$6.3 billion. At the second edition of the World Defence Show held in Riyadh that same month, the scale of China's presence was only second to the host.



▲ A shot of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on 6 December 2023.
(Sergei Savostyanov/Sputnik/Pool via Reuters)

In addition, given increasing tourism, the two countries have pledged to increase air flights, while Ajlan & Bros Holding Group, a private conglomerate headquartered in Riyadh, is facilitating the entry of Chinese companies into the kingdom.

Such developments show that Saudi Arabia and China are expanding their cooperation holistically.

Warm Saudi-China relations since 2016

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The upward trend in Saudi-Chinese cooperation started under the incumbent leadership of both countries. In 2016, Saudi Arabia and China agreed to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership during Chinese President Xi Jinping' s visit to Saudi Arabia. That same year, China issued its Arab Policy Paper.

In 2019, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) visited China, and in 2022, Xi made a reciprocal visit to Saudi Arabia. During his visit, Xi participated in the China-Arab States Summit and the China-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit. Both countries also signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement, leading the media of both countries to draw synergies between Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia' s “roadmap for economic diversification, global engagement, and enhanced quality of life” , and China' s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In the area of facilitating people-to-people exchanges and developing cultural exchanges, Saudi Arabia has added the Chinese language to the curriculum of schools and colleges. In November 2023, the Saudi Souk Festival in Shanghai attracted 13,000 visitors, and the country' s feature in a Chinese reality show, *Davis Hit the Road*, led to a 772% spike in searches for "Saudi Arabia" on the online travel services website qunar.com (去哪儿网).

Saudi Arabia also aims to attract over three million Chinese tourists by the end of 2030 through means such as getting the “ Approved Destination Status ” from China and working with over 700 partners in China, including strategic allies like Trip.com and Tencent' s WeChat.

China and Saudi Arabia have also advanced financial cooperation between their stock exchanges (including Saudi investment in Hong Kong), concluded currency swap arrangements and made plans to expand their trade in local currencies. They also have joint investment projects such as a refinery and petrochemical complex in Liaoning, and plans to develop the AI ecosystem in Saudi Arabia.

On the international front, Riyadh has joined the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a dialogue partner, and along with several other countries, was invited to join the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) grouping last year.

Shifting US-Saudi relations

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Among Saudi Arabia's diplomatic overtures toward other countries, its burgeoning relations with China are of particular concern to the US.

The US had maintained a dominant position in the Gulf and remained Saudi Arabia's closest ally throughout the postwar decades. The oil-for-security arrangement that emerged between the US and Saudi Arabia in the post-World War II period proved robust enough to survive tense Arab-Israeli conflicts in which both countries backed opposing sides. But this equation between Riyadh and Washington has been changing since the turn of the century.

In the past several years, especially since MBS became the de facto ruler of the kingdom, Saudi Arabia has started diversifying its partnerships. At the same time, the gap between Saudi Arabia and the US has widened in different areas. A number of factors have led to these changing dynamics between the two countries.

On the US side, factors include its unconditional support for Israel, the discovery of shale gas in the US which reduced US reliance on Saudi oil, the emphasis from US quarters on the normative differences between Saudi and US cultural values, and in the context of the rise of China, the US shifting the strategic balance to the Indo-Pacific.

For the Saudi monarchy, the US turning its commitments away from the security of the region, coupled with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, led them to expand their partnerships. In addition, the ambitious leadership of MBS, who aspires to adopt an independent foreign policy and diversify the kingdom's economy to reduce its dependence on crude oil, was the key driver behind changes in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

China's policies favourable to Saudi Arabia

However, Saudi-US dynamics are not the only factors (re)shaping the regional environment. Many other imperatives, including Chinese policies, also contributed to this.

The growing Saudi-Chinese convergence is rooted in their shared interests, with China seeking crude oil and Saudi Arabia seeking new markets. In view of Saudi Arabia's aspirations for access to technology in different areas, China has shown a willingness to transfer technology to

Saudi Arabia, including in the defence sector, nuclear energy and AI. This is in line with its foreign policy approach and assessment of strategic interests, as seen also in its transfer of defence technology to its close partner, Pakistan.

While Saudi Arabia has an ambitious target of 50% localisation of defence procurement by 2030 and even though US weapons are far superior in quality compared to those of China, the strings attached to them and the lack of technology transfer components make them less attractive to the kingdom.

Aside from that, China maintains a non-interference policy and does not interfere in Saudi Arabia's internal affairs. In the past, Riyadh used to voice its concerns against the plight of Muslim minorities in different countries, such as the Kashmiris in India, the Rohingyas in Myanmar, and the Uighurs in China. This was a source of tension in Saudi Arabia's relationship with these countries. However, the new Saudi leadership has significantly toned down this stance, implying that these minority issues are internal matters of the concerned states.

This change has greatly improved Riyadh's relations with these countries. In the case of China, Riyadh not only refrained from commenting on Chinese "harsh measures" against Uighurs but also supported China's policies on the UN human rights platform.

In addition, China's stance on the Palestinian issue, historically and presently in the current Israel-Hezbollah situation, is closer to the Saudi position and the stance adopted by a majority of Islamic states. China emphatically supports a two-state solution. It sent its envoy on a peace mission to the region, held discussions with other stakeholders and hosted a delegation of Arab-Islamic foreign ministers in November 2023. Earlier in March 2023, the Chinese also brokered an agreement leading to the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which grabbed international attention.

Finally, China pursues a relationship with Saudi Arabia from a long-term perspective. This is different from US diplomacy, which has manifested shifts in recent years. For instance, in the early 2010s, the US, under its "pivot to Asia" strategy, abandoned the Middle East to compete

with China in the Asia-Pacific region. A few years later, it returned to the region for a similar reason.

From the Saudi Arabian side, steps such as domestic social reforms, the opening up of society, the granting of greater women's rights, the abolishment of religious police, the relaxation of dress codes and the policy allowing foreigners to rent accommodations without proof of their relationship have played a crucial role in breaking overall stereotypes around the kingdom. As these reforms draw international attention, they will no doubt also play a part in attracting Chinese tourists and investors.

Some caveats in the Saudi-China relationship

Along with these developments in Saudi-Chinese relations, some caveats need attention. First, China remains reluctant to get involved in the Gulf region geopolitically, to become a security guarantor, or even to take part in joint security-related arrangements with Saudi Arabia or other regional countries in any explicit way.

China's focus will remain on economic cooperation until the mid-term future. This approach will limit the deepening of Saudi Arabia-China relations in core strategic domains.

Second, Saudi Arabia and the US have been negotiating a mutual defence treaty akin to the ones Washington has with Japan and South Korea. A key component of this proposed treaty is that the US would become a formal security guarantor for Saudi Arabia in exchange for the kingdom's recognition of Israel.

If this treaty is finally signed, Riyadh would likely prioritise its security relationship with the US and become increasingly reliant on American military technology and expertise. This shift would undoubtedly constrain China's burgeoning defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia.

Third, the impression among analysts that Saudi Arabia and China are balancing against the US might be overstated. Saudi Arabia continues to deepen relations with the US and the West. This can be clearly seen from the ongoing Saudi-American negotiations for a comprehensive deal and Saudi Arabia's predominant reliance on the US for arms procurement.

Similarly, China does not see its relations with the kingdom and Saudi-US relations as a zero-sum game. In contrast, the US security umbrella and military presence in the region guarantee regional stability, which is crucial to China's economic and energy interests.

Fourth, a study of Chinese foreign policy demonstrates its penchant for steady growth and this is unlikely to change. This suggests a more gradual growth, which means China will take more time to deepen its relationship with Saudi Arabia.

What lies ahead?

The shifting global power structure and political structures of China and Saudi Arabia indicate a further strengthening of the relationship.

The world is witnessing a power shift as the dominance of the US-led West, which has long held sway over Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, declines. This decline is empowering Riyadh to forge new partnerships and broaden its alliances. The power shift also corresponds to China's rise. Therefore, Saudi Arabia and China have greater space to expand their relationship.

Despite how proponents of the “liberal democratic order” view it, the political systems of China and Saudi Arabia inherently support the continuity of their respective policies. China is under one-party rule. President Xi is expected to remain in power for the foreseeable future after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) abolished the two-term limit for the presidency.

Even if Xi were to step down, any new leadership would come from within the CCP. The hierarchical structure and consistent foreign policy of the CCP suggest that China's relations with Saudi Arabia are likely to continue in a similar direction.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia operates as a constitutional monarchy. The current de facto ruler, MBS, is 38 years old and, under normal conditions, is likely to stay in power for a long period of time. Therefore, the Saudi Arabia-China relationship bodes well for the future.

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RCAS Commentary

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

Nian Peng, Apr.11, 2024

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.

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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.

The article was first published at Think China, Singapore, Apr.11, 2024, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/would-marcoss-dialogue-promises-bring-peace-and-stability-south-china-sea>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/197.html>)

RCAS Commentary

Iran-Israel Conflict: Impacts on Regional and Global Politic

Mairaj ul Hamid Nasri, Apr.23, 2024

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

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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.

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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

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civilizations, where humanity should prevail and human rights should be prioritized for the sake of securing a peaceful world.

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http://www.rcas.top/list_30/2305.html.*

RCAS Commentary

Balikatan 2024 Exercise Will Escalate South China Sea Tensions

Nian Peng, May.5, 2024

The annual Balikatan joint military exercise between US and Philippine troops commenced on 22 April and will continue until 10 May. A total of over 16,700 troops are participating in the military exercise, and 14 other countries, including Australia, France and Japan, are taking part in the exercise as observers.



▲ France's FS Vendemiaire (centre), the US's USS Harpers Ferry (left) and the Philippines' BRP Ramon Alcaraz on 25 April 2024, during war games held off the coast of Palawan in the Philippines. (Armed Forces of the Philippines)

The expansion of observers in this year's Balikatan indicates the Philippines' intention to grow its international support through the military exercise. As the first-ever US-Japan-Australia-Philippine joint drill had already been conducted in the South China Sea (SCS), it is more likely that some observers, Japan in particular, would become formal members of the Balikatan in the future. So, it is safe to say that the Balikatan is transforming from a bilateral exercise to a multilateral one between the US, the Philippines and its allies and partners in the coming years.

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According to USNI News, the three-week-long Balikatan focuses on several high-end coastal defence activities, including counter-landing and sinking exercises. It is the first time that the sinking exercise is being included. Earlier, the Philippine military had announced plans to sink a retired Philippine Navy ship, the “BRP Lake Caliraya” which is of Chinese origin. The vessel will serve as the “enemy” ship during the drill.

The Philippines’ strategic position elevated

Although the Philippine officials said the BRP Lake Caliraya was planned as a target of the Philippine-US joint exercise as far back as July 2023, the news is perceived by the Chinese side as a clear provocative intent sent by the Philippine military. It is not only a symbolic message but also a clear warning to China: if China escalates retaliation actions, such as by using the water cannons against the Philippine vessels in the SCS, the Philippines is likely to respond even more strongly to weaken China’s countermeasures.

Besides, the exercise’s operational area is situated in waters located 12 nautical miles west of Palawan Island, near both the SCS and the Taiwan Strait. This underscores the US’s strategy to connect the SCS issue with the Taiwan issue, establishing the Philippines as a frontier in resisting China’s military influence in the SCS and the Taiwan Strait.

This elevation of the Philippines’ strategic position aligns it with the significance of Japan and South Korea in the broader geopolitical landscape. In other words, the Philippines, together with Japan and South Korea, have become the main pillars of the US’s “first island chain” strategy aiming at containing China’s rise in the West Asia-Pacific. Given the rising tension in the SCS and the Taiwan Strait, the Philippines’ rising significance in US’s military deterrence towards China would cause China’s strong countermeasures.

Increasing defences against the Chinese

In addition, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) is also joining Balikatan for the first time. The PCG spokesperson Rear Admiral Armand Balilio said that the PCG is set to provide “perimeter security” during the exercise. It is believed that the US Navy has committed to enhance the PCG’s capability in “fighting” against the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), thus undermining

China's "grey zone" strategy in the SCS. However, the struggles between the two coast guards of China and the Philippines might cause big troubles as there are no clear rules or emergency measures to deal with the conflicts between the coast guards.

The US has also deployed a midrange missile system in northern Luzon Island, which aims to counter the multi-domain threats posed by peer adversaries such as China. According to USNI News, the Philippine military lists the missile system as one of the assets forces that will be used during the Balikatan exercise, though it is unclear in what capacity. The article added that "Philippine military officials confirmed that it will be fired in the country during another exercise later this year".

This is a dangerous action adopted by the Philippines. If we look at the serious consequences of the US deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) in South Korea, we will fully realise the high risks of this missile system on the China-Philippines relations.

Taking a tougher stance in the SCS disputes

Meanwhile, the Philippines consolidated its hardliner approaches in the SCS disputes and non-engagement stance with China by being absent from the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) held concurrently in Qingdao, China, though the Chinese PLA sent an invitation to the Philippine Army.

It seems that the Marcos administration is more confident in maintaining a tough stance in the SCS disputes. In the military domain, the US firmly pledged support to the Philippines during the US-Japan-Philippines Summit and the Balikatan exercise, with Japan also extending its backing.

Economically, the trio of the US, Japan, and the Philippines jointly launched the "Luzon Economic Corridor" in an effort to significantly reduce the Philippines heavy dependence on the Chinese economy. Although China remains the Philippines' largest trading partner, Chinese investment in the country has noticeably declined since Manila suspended the BRI cooperation agreement.

Domestically, Marcos consolidated its power base by mobilising the public support via the confrontations with China in the SCS and crushing his opponents such as the former President Duterte and probably his daughter Sarah, the vice-president of the Philippines.

Given these developments, it seems China's well-intentioned advice to the Philippines has been ignored by Marcos, either unintentionally or internationally. This has led to the intensification of tensions in the China-Philippines relations and the loss of a conducive atmosphere for bilateral talks. Therefore, the SCS tensions look set to continue to be intensified in the future.

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RCAS Commentary

China-U.S. Tech Rivalry Enters into the Gulf States

Ghulam Ali, May.9, 2024

The US-China rivalry is the most dominant aspect of 21st-century geopolitics, significantly impacting the world. It has expanded across various fields and geographies. The Gulf region, which was mainly absorbing the geopolitical heat of this rivalry, has also witnessed it in the technological sphere, especially artificial intelligence (AI). Two larger projects, G42 in the UAE and the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Saudi Arabia, are particularly notable.



▲ G42 and Microsoft Partner to Drive UAE's Digital Transformation. (Tech News)

In April 2024, UAE's G42 finally signed a deal with a US giant, Microsoft, which will make a US\$1.5 billion in investment in the Emirate. As a part of the deal, G42 will phase out Chinese hardware and cut businesses with Chinese entities. Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE ambassador to the US, termed the deal a 'culmination of comprehensive strategic partnership' at the 'government-to-government' level.

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The G42 was created in 2018 and is headed by Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a prominent member of the royal family and National Security Advisor. It has a range of AI projects. It sells AI services, builds supercomputers, develops a large language model for use in generative AI and started working on cloud computing and chip building. For the initial years, G42 partnered with Microsoft and OpenAI as well as Chinese technology companies.

Since the G42 relies on semiconductors made by US chipmaker Nvidia, US officials were concerned that the company might become a backchannel door for China to access US technology. In January, the US House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party asked the Department of Commerce to investigate G42, citing suspicions of ties to blacklisted Chinese entities. The request followed months of quiet U.S. pressure on the issue. American officials reportedly told their UAE counterparts that for sensitive emerging technologies, the Emirates must choose between its close ally, the US, and China. White House officials reportedly voiced their concerns about G42's deepening links with China directly with Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed, the company's chairperson. If those concerns were not addressed, the US warned, it could put G42 on the Entity List, a similar list to the one Huawei was placed on in 2019, thereby barring it from acquiring critical US technologies.

Faced with a binary choice, G42 made a final choice and publicly announced that its investment arm has fully divested from Chinese companies, including a significant \$100 million stake in ByteDance, the controversial app TikTok's owner.

In the case of the UAE, the G42 incident stands out as the most significant occurrence in which US officials explicitly applied pressure and directly intervened in the matter.

The other notable event of clear US pressure was the distance of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) from Chinese companies. KAUST is known in fields such as telecommunications, semiconductors, energy and environmental engineering, artificial intelligence, materials design, computer science, and bioscience. It has signed agreements with academic institutes in Shenzhen. In fact, in Saudi Arabia, KAUST has the largest number of research projects and partnerships with China. In 2023, KAUST released AceGPT, an Arabic large language model for powering generative AI bots, which was developed in collaboration

with the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Shenzhen Research Institute of Big Data. Most significantly, KAUST developed advanced supercomputers in the region, which required thousands of microchips manufactured by Nvidia, the leading producer of high-performance chips utilized in AI. As KAUST hosted the largest number of Chinese scholars and students on the one hand and heavily relied on US technologies on the other, US officials feared that students and professors from Chinese military-linked universities would use the university platform to sidestep US sanctions and boost China in the race for A.I. supremacy.

The university's substantial chip purchase, estimated to exceed \$100 million in value, faced delays due to a review by the US government. The US, which could generally share technology with Saudi Arabia, a critical ally in the region, began to raise security concerns and risks as the Kingdom's links with China expanded. Against the backdrop of increasing US pressure, Saudi universities made explicit declarations to strictly comply with all US export license terms and conditions.

Given the pivotal role of AI in shaping the future, the intensity of competition in this domain may surpass other dimensions of the US-China rivalry. In October 2022, the US implemented a series of export controls that severely hampered China's future advancements in AI. Subsequently, in March of the following year, Japan and the Netherlands also imposed restrictions on advanced semiconductor technologies and their exports. The US, Japan, and the Netherlands combined contribute approximately 90% of the equipment utilized in computer chip manufacturing facilities worldwide.

The centrality of AI and other emerging technologies in the Gulf States' modernization drive demanded reciprocal cooperation with both US and Chinese tech companies. Arab monarchies intend to become hubs of AI talent and innovation and are therefore investing in these sectors. For instance, Saudi Arabia has established a US\$40 billion investment fund dedicated to AI, with the objective of becoming the world's largest investor in this field. Riyadh is also working toward the establishment of its own AI companies. The UAE's AI sector is even more advanced. In 2017, it made history by appointing the world's first AI minister; in 2020, it established the first specialized AI research university; and in 2023, it launched Falcon, a highly acclaimed

open-source large language model. Over the past three years, the country has quadrupled its multinational AI workforce.

Given the necessity of cooperation with both the US and Chinese companies, the Gulf States are striving to maintain a careful balance. Gulf states are aware of the advancement of US technology as well as of its allies, the strong network of the supply chain, its strategic power (which it can use even to coerce), and its long-standing relationship with regional states. At the same time, the Gulf States are aware of China's investment potential, enormous market, rapid advancement in the AI sector, technology transfer, local empowerment, and policy-level synergies with no strings attached. Gulf states are 'steering clear of a diplomatic zero-sum game' and will 'foster partnerships with each side on a case-by-case basis, depending on which one best supports the region's efforts to create a homegrown AI ecosystem.'

According to Denis Simon, a US-based expert on China's higher education and science and former executive vice-chancellor of Duke Kunshan University near Shanghai, "The US and China are playing a big game on a global scale but these countries want to play with both players and not get drawn into that [US-China rivalry]." Riyadh increasingly deals on its own terms and offers itself a neutral place for both Chinese and American companies as well as AI experts. For instance, Saudi Arabia retained control of its own technologies rather than giving Chinese companies IP rights, as China insisted.

While the media framed the G42 deal in the context of the US-China rivalry, the G42 made the decision out of its search for state-of-the-art technology, as it stated: 'to partner with the most sophisticated AI technology companies in the world.' Similarly, KAUST made a decision based on sophisticated US technologies. In addition to the G42 and KAUST, the UAE and Saudi Arabia governments and companies are engaged with U.S. and Chinese companies in various other projects.

In 2023, Alibaba and Saudi Telecom partnered for US\$ 238 million to build cloud computer infrastructure, and Huawei set up G5 networks in the region. China's largest internet company, Tencent, is also exploring business in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

To conclude, the US-China tech war has entered the Gulf region, which is already rife with varied tensions. Washington's success in G42 and the KAUST reflects the level of its influence as well as an allure to its advanced technology. While it appeared the US won, the UAE and Saudi companies made decisions that suited them. China's rapid advancement in AI, coupled with its deepening engagement with the Gulf in different areas, indicates its future potential. Washington's ability to gain major deals does not mean that it will have a free ride. It might face even fiercer competition with China in the Gulf region, which is capitalizing on this rivalry.

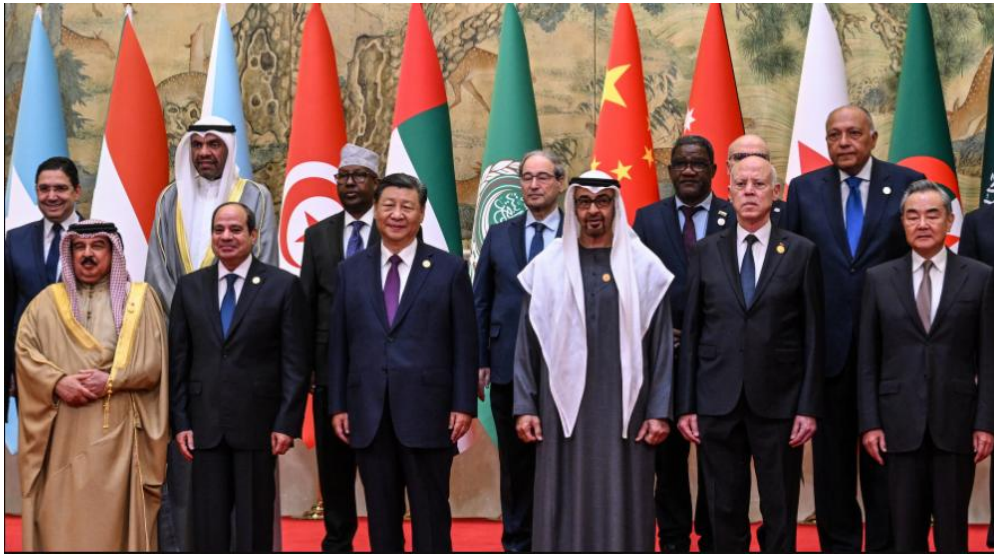
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RCAS Commentary

China's Achilles' Heel in Relationship with Arab Gulf States

Ghulam Ali, Jul.6, 2024

Although China's relations with the Arab Gulf States are expanding and grabbing international headlines, they face a major obstacle. China shuns military alliances, whereas the Arab Gulf States have heavily relied on external security guarantees since their independence. This significant gap in the national strategies of the two sides will prevent the relationship from advancing into higher geopolitical realms, limiting cooperation to secondary areas in an era of shifting power centers. Amidst various ongoing shifts, security matters continue to shape regional geopolitics.



▲ Speaking at the 10th ministerial conference of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum held on 30 May in Beijing, Xi Jinping hailed a ‘new era’ of Chinese–Arab relations. (China-US Focus)

Background

In the post-World War II period, the Arab Gulf States heavily depended on US protection through formal and informal security arrangements. With the exception of Saudi Arabia, the other five members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain, had formal defense agreements with the US. Although Saudi Arabia avoided a

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formal defense pact, in practice, it nearly totally depended on the US for security throughout the decades. The US role in particular expanded after the British withdrew from the region. Washington developed an all-encompassing engagement with Gulf monarchies. It provided them with security against external threats, established military bases, and deployed service personnel and equipment. The Fifth Fleet of the US Navy established its headquarters in Bahrain, which serves as a strategic hub for naval operations in the entire region. Over the decades, Arab Gulf States have entrenched their national security with the US to such an extent that disentangling from this relationship will be a protracted and difficult process. The US proved its commitment with its actions. The most audacious example was the US' s decisive response to Iraq' s invasion of Kuwait in 1991. The US-led coalition liberated Kuwait within five days of the operation Desert Storm. This further deepened the Arab Gulf States' s reliance on US security arrangements. Within three years of the war, in 1994, the UAE also signed a comprehensive defense agreement with the US.

This decade-old US-Arab Gulf States relationship, however, began to change during the 2010s. The US' s lukewarm response to the security of these states became the primary reason for this shift. For instance, the US showed a cold response to its allies during the Arab Spring, which toppled several regimes, and against drone attacks by Iran-backed Houthis in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. As a result, the Arab Gulf States sought alternative allies and accelerated their efforts toward domestic arms production. In 2015, Saudi Arabia established the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT), apparently to counterterrorism, which was equally driven by Riyadh' s sense of insecurity. The search for security also led the Arab Gulf States to develop relations with China, Russia, India, and other Asian countries during this period.

The US Return to the Region

As the US' s lukewarm response to the security of the Gulf monarchies during the 2010s became the main reason behind their gradual drift away from the US influence, as mentioned above, the US offered greater security incentives to reverse the trend several years later when it decided to reestablish its dominance in the region. As a part of the Abraham Accords (2020), the US approved the sale of its most advanced stealth fighter jet, F-35, to the UAE. In September

2023, the US signed the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement with Bahrain. In January 2024, the US reached an agreement with Qatar to extend the US military presence at the Al Udeid Air Base in the southwest of Doha. This is the largest US military installation in the Middle East, with the capacity to accommodate over 10,000 US troops. Most significant among these US security-centric incentives for the region is its ongoing negotiations with Saudi Arabia for a comprehensive defense pact. The pact, which is at the final stage of negotiations, according to the top officials of both sides, would provide Saudi Arabia with a security guarantee, access to advanced US weapons, and nuclear and emerging technologies. In return, Riyadh will halt Chinese arms purchases and restrict Beijing's investment in crucial areas of the Kingdom. The pact will formally bind Saudi Arabia to the US security structure in the region.

Parallel to the Arab Gulf States, the US expanded its military alliances globally. In its latest enlargements, NATO accepted Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024, raising the total membership to 32. The US also hinted at further upgrading the defense agreement with Japan that was signed in 1960. In June 2024, the US signed a 10-year Bilateral Security Agreement with Ukraine. In addition to formal ones, the US pushed forward quasi-alliances. In 2017, it resuscitated the Quad, a quadrilateral grouping comprising the US, India, Japan, and Australia. In 2021, the US established AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership involving Australia, the UK, and the US, to assist Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines. The global expansion of US alliances further solidified its perception as a capable security ally in the eyes of the Arab Gulf States.

China's Perspective on Military Alliances

In contrast to the US's audacious security arrangements and alliances, China has remained averse to participating in security arrangements, whether collective or bilateral, let alone forming formal alliances. This eschewal started in the early 1980s when the Chinese leadership led by Deng Xiaoping decided to strictly follow a non-alliance policy.

In the 21st century, as China embarked on a great power status coupled with intensifying Sino-US rivalry, it initiated a debate in Chinese academia to rethink non-alliances. These debates

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resulted in the formation of the Global Security Initiative (GSI), which Xi Jinping first proposed at the Boao Economic Forum in April 2022. The GSI provides a broad view of China's perspective on international security, emphasizing comprehensive security architecture while respecting sovereignty. Moreover, the GSI makes a 'strident criticism' of the US alliances, challenges US leadership, and proposes the Chinese model as an alternative. The GSI also guides China's security approach to the Arab Gulf States. At his keynote address to the China-GCC meeting in December 2022, Xi Jinping invited regional countries to join the GSI. However, GSI did not receive much attention. Among the Arab Gulf States, only Kuwait expressed its open support for the GSI. Saudi Arabia expressed only "appreciation"; the UAE remained unclear, while Qatar, Bahrain and Oman remained indifferent. One of the reasons behind this lukewarm response was GSI's strident criticism of US alliances, whereas most Arab Gulf States were US allies. Second, and most importantly, none of the Chinese initiatives addressed the security requirements of the Arab Gulf States. What, then, is the nature of China's engagement with the region?

Nature of China's Engagement

China's engagement with the Arab Gulf States, compared to its role two decades ago, is on the rise. However, Beijing's overall influence is steady, with a focus on nonconfrontational areas and picking up low-hanging fruits. In the diplomatic arena, China has moved from a cautious to an active role, as manifested in the China-brokered deal that normalized Saudi-Iranian relations in March 2023. This showed that China could mediate between two parties at odds if both agreed. This was an optimal point in China's diplomacy in the region. However, after Houthis' attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, it became clear that China would continue to abstain from joining any bilateral or multilateral security arrangement. This dissipated the hype that had emerged after the Saudi-Iranian deal and reiterated Beijing's steadfast non-alliance policy.

In the defense sector, which, along with emerging technologies concerned Western countries, China's actual engagement is minimal. While China's establishment of the largest pavilions in the defense show in the UAE and Saudi Arabia created hype, the share of its arms exports to

the region remained below single digits, with 2.1% to the UAE and 6.3% to Saudi Arabia. The percentage of Chinese arms exports to other member countries is even lower. For emerging technologies, China initially made progress. Chinese companies Huawei and Alibaba were involved in setting up the 5G network in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as in cloud computing, cybersecurity, smart cities, and other related services. However, as China began to deepen its footprint, the US forced regional countries to restrict their cooperation with China. Under U.S. pressure, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology publicly announced its decision to divest from Chinese technologies. The CEO of Saudi Aramco stated that if the U.S. required it, the company would separate from Chinese technology. In April 2024, the UAE's G42 signed an agreement with Microsoft and decided to phase out Chinese hardware and cut ties with Chinese entities.

China's currency swap agreements with the Arab Gulf States were also overstated. The total value of China's currency swap with Saudi Arabia is US\$6.9 billion, signed in 2024; with the UAE, US\$4.9 billion, signed in 2023; and with Qatar, US\$5.7 billion, signed in 2021. These amounts are minimal compared to the volumes of their economies, their two-way trade, and the overall value of China's currency swaps, with 40 countries worth US\$586 billion. Therefore, there is no possibility on the horizon of the so-called petroyuan replacing the petrodollar.

It is important to remember that the broader Middle East, encompassing the Arab Gulf States, is exceedingly volatile and characterized by violent historical and ideological conflicts. China seeks to avoid security involvement in this region, apprehensive that terrorism could potentially spill over onto the mainland.

Moreover, while China is often perceived as embarking on a global expansion, its primary focus remains on maintaining internal stability through sustained economic growth. It is true that this policy is gradually evolving, but there is no indication that China will consider forming security partnerships or military alliances with other countries in the future.

While this limitation prevents China from deepening its partnerships with most countries, it is particularly felt in the Arab Gulf States, which have a historical and structural dependence on external security guarantors. Therefore, China's cooperation with the Arab Gulf States will

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remain limited to areas such as energy, trade, finance, investments, tourism, a moderate range of emerging technologies, and defense.

There is little likelihood of the two sides expanding their cooperation in higher geopolitical domains. Given the dominant influence of the US in the region, which could further expand if the defense pact with Saudi Arabia is signed, China may face additional challenges in areas that Washington considers threatening to its interests. The US is likely to remain the dominant player in the Arab Gulf States in the future.

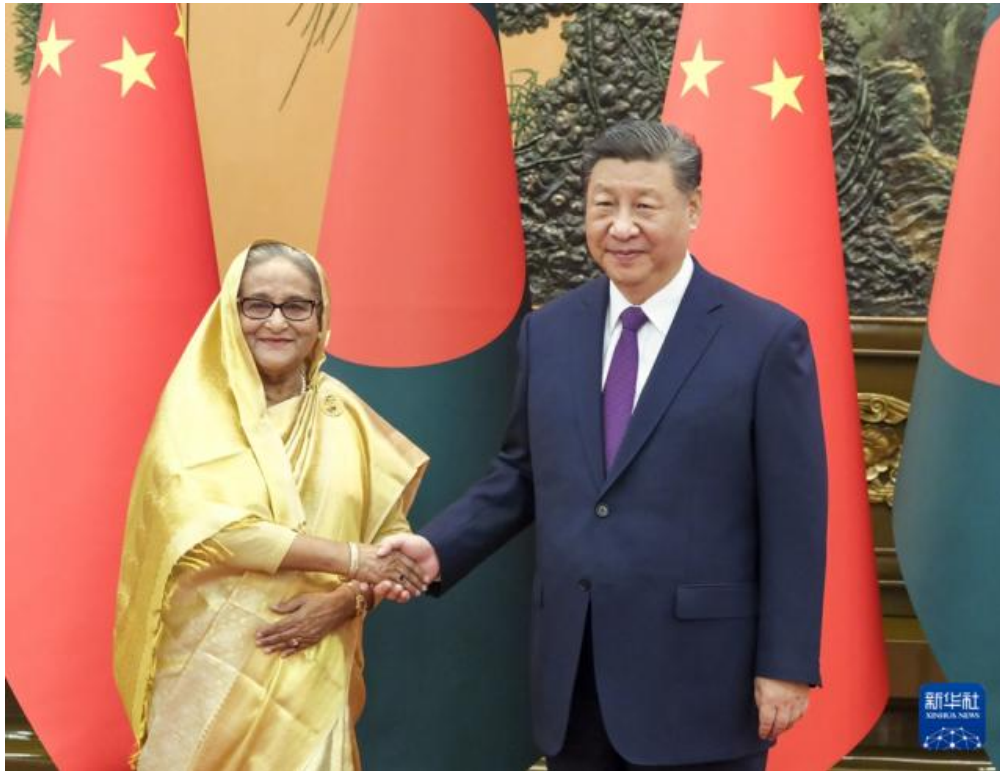
The article was first published at China-US Focus, Hong Kong, July.3, 2024, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/chinas-achilles-heel-in-relationship-with-arab-gulf-states>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/217.html>)

RCAS Commentary

The China-Bangladesh Friendship is A Model of Peaceful Coexistence in the New Era

Nian Peng, Jul.11, 2024

At the invitation of Chinese Premier Li Qiang, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina started her China visit on July 8. This is her first visit to China after taking office and her second visit to China in five years. Last August, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Hasina during the BRICS Summit held in Johannesburg, South Africa.



▲ Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (Xinhua News)

The frequent high-ranking visits between the two top leaders of China and Bangladesh reflect the high degree of mutual trust. It is also an important manifestation of the new vitality of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (the Five Principles) in the new era. PM Hasina's visit comes

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shortly after the successful convening of the conference marking the 70th Anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence held in Beijing on June 28.

Seventy years ago, more than 20 Asian and African countries gathered in Bandung and proposed 10 principles for handling interstate relations, advocating the Bandung spirit of unity, friendship, and cooperation. Over the past 70 years, the Five Principles have been embraced by an ever-growing number of countries, evolving into open, inclusive, and universally applicable basic norms of international relations and fundamental principles of international law, guiding the continuous advancement of China-Bangladesh relations.

During her meeting with President Xi Jinping last August, Prime Minister Hasina stated that the excellent relations between Bangladesh and China were based on mutual respect and noninterference in each other's internal affairs.

Over the past 49 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations, China has not only refrained from meddling in Bangladesh's internal affairs but also opposed external interference, jointly safeguarding each other's core interests.

During Bangladesh's parliamentary election earlier this year, China consistently adhered to the principle of noninterference and fully respected the choice of the Bangladeshi people. In contrast, on the eve of the election, the US Department of State called for fair, just, transparent, and democratic elections in Bangladesh. After PM Hasina's victory in the election, the US Department of State criticized the election as not being free and fair.

This led to PM Hasina's public statement in May 2024 where she revealed that she was offered a "smooth return to power" in exchange for leasing the country's land for a foreign airbase. Although she did not disclose the name of the country that made the offer, it is widely believed that the offer would have come from the United States.

Over the past 49 years, China-Bangladesh cooperation has continued to deepen, with mutually beneficial and win-win outcomes. China has remained Bangladesh's largest trading partner and the largest source of imports for 13 consecutive years, and it is also an important source of raw materials for Bangladesh's manufacturing industry. Moreover, Bangladesh is China's second

largest trading partner in South Asia. Since Bangladesh joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2016, bilateral trade between China and Bangladesh has grown from \$15.3 billion in 2016 to \$27.8bn in 2022, reaching a new historical high.

China is also Bangladesh's second largest source of foreign investment. Since 2016, the stock of Chinese investment in Bangladesh has soared from \$241m to \$1.346bn in 2022. As of September 2023, the total amount of Chinese investment in Bangladesh reached \$3.17bn, with 21 bridges and 27 power projects implemented. A large number of flagship projects, such as the Padma Bridge and the Dasherbandi Sewage Treatment Plant, have been successfully completed, providing a boost to Bangladesh's economic development.

Currently, more than 670 Chinese enterprises are investing and operating in Bangladesh, driving employment for over 550,000 locals and benefiting the local population with the dividends of development.

According to Bangladeshi scholars, in recent years, there has been a surge in the number of Chinese enterprises investing in Bangladesh, and the number of Chinese people in Bangladesh has increased significantly. This has made Bangladesh a new "hot land" for Chinese investment in South Asia.

There are also high expectations for PM Hasina's China trip, both among Chinese and Bangladeshi experts. It is hoped that China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) will push forward China-Bangladesh trade and investment cooperation to a new level and enhance Bangladesh's transportation, power, and energy infrastructure, as well as its digital economy and blue economy development.

We also look forward to promoting the strategic docking of China's GDI, BRI, and Bangladesh's "Vision 2041" and the dream of "Shonar Bangla," thereby making more robust economic ties between the two countries, yielding even more fruitful, mutually beneficial, and win-win results for both sides.

Due to the fierce strategic confrontation between China and the United States, China and Bangladesh have also strengthened their policy communication on several international and regional issues based on their common interests.

In April 2023, Bangladesh announced its “Indo-Pacific Outlook,” distancing itself from the United States’ “Indo-Pacific Strategy.” This reflects a neutral position of Bangladesh amid China-US competition rather than a swing to the US.

Two months later, Bangladesh officially applied to join the BRICS, a fast-growing global organization founded by China, Russia, India, Brazil, and South Africa. In response, China has expressed full support for Bangladesh’s early admission as a new member of the BRICS.

Under China’s diplomatic mediation, Bangladesh and Myanmar signed an agreement on the repatriation of Rohingya refugees in 2017. During the past seven years, Bangladesh has made great contributions to jointly solving the Rohingya crisis.

As the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen said, China understands and sympathizes with the tremendous costs that Bangladesh has borne regarding the Rohingya issue and strives to restart the repatriation process for Rohingya refugees.

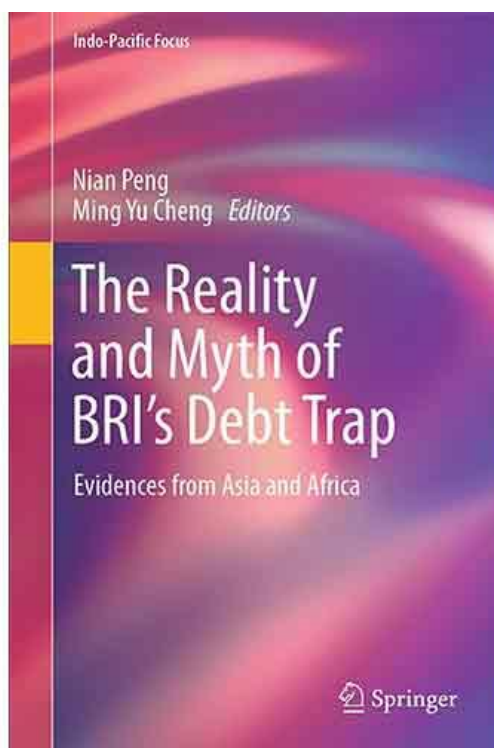
This article was first published at Dhaka Tribune, Bangladesh, July 11, 2024, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/351714/a-deepening-friendship>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/220.html>)

RCAS Commentary

Investigating A Debt Trap

Ejaz Hussain, Jul.14, 2024

Since its launch in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative has garnered both appreciation and admiration from numerous countries and corporations worldwide. Nonetheless, it has also faced fierce criticism and sparked controversial narratives, such as China's 'debt trap' diplomacy, through which it purportedly aims to dominate politics and policy in several countries across Asia, Africa and potentially South America.



▲ The title page of RCAS new book on BRI.

A recently published book, *The Reality and Myth of BRI's Debt Trap: Evidence from Asia and Africa*, edited by Nian Peng and Ming Yu Cheng, is an attempt by Chinese scholars and experts from selected BRI countries to empirically address the debt-related allegations by certain Western policymakers and some Indian politicians and scholars.

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One of the editors, Nian Peng, is an associate professor and research fellow at the Department of Foreign Languages and Research Centre for Indian Ocean Island Countries at South China University of Technology in Guangzhou, China. He is also the director of the Hong Kong Research Centre for Asian Studies in Hong Kong. Ming Yu Cheng is a professor at the Faculty of Accountancy and Management, director of the Institute of Management and Leadership Development, and chairperson of the Belt and Road Strategic Research Centre at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman in Malaysia.

The book is organised into 12 chapters, including the introduction by Nian Peng and Ming Yu Cheng. The editors have taken a balanced approach in terms of offering an analytical understanding of the socioeconomic opportunities and challenges posed by the BRI over the last decade. These opportunities and challenges are empirically analysed in 11 chapters of the book through case studies from select countries in Asia (i.e., Cambodia) and Africa (i.e., Nigeria).

In Chapter Two, Zhuo Hua Kou and Nian Peng contend that the BRI debt trap is a misunderstanding sought to be created by certain American, European and Indian policy and media circles. While acknowledging the debt-related challenges in certain countries, such as Cambodia, the authors disagree with the notion of a Chinese-engineered debt trap diplomacy intended to penetrate the political, financial and policy realms of the BRI states. Instead, they highlight the positive effects of BRI funds, which low-income countries such as Pakistan need(ed) to avoid default on debt payments.

In Chapter Three, Siling Yang and Angyu Jiang approach the so-called debt trap theory from a regional geopolitical perspective. The authors posit that the ‘theory’ has been developed and projected by India with the aim of countering the perceived Chinese influence in South and Southeast Asia. For the past decade, Indian academics, journalists and politicians have not only opposed the BRI and criticized the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor but also strategically allied with the US. India has joined alliances, such as the Quad, to resist China’s geopolitical rise.

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In Chapter Four, Myint San presents a case study of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. The author argues that the CMEC could be a game-changer for Myanmar and the region. “With the development of the Kyaukphyu deep seaport, Myanmar will become the hub of regional economic activity.” Nonetheless, “the progress of CMEC project activities is slow because of the Myanmar government’s caution about the ‘debt trap’ issue.” He says the global recession caused by the Russia-Ukraine war, political instability and (maritime) conflicts have also hampered BRI development in Myanmar and the Southeast Asian region.

Neak Chandarith and Sok Sothearak, in Chapter Five, investigate the key causes and potential risks of Cambodia’s rising external debt. Cambodia’s external public debt stocks have raised considerable concerns over debt sustainability and China’s growing influence on the country’s policies. However, they conclude, Cambodia faces a low risk regarding its external public debt due to public-private partnerships, an effective debt management framework, concessional loans, a large foreign exchange reserve and a diversification strategy. Its challenges include the unpredictability of private debt, for which there is no management framework in place.

In Chapter Six, Sypha Chanthavong explores the positive and negative effects of the Laos-China Railway on Laos’s economy and society. The author posits that the project has “a significant role in the economic integration of Laos with neighbouring countries ... the resettlement programme and social and environmental concerns during the construction and operation have imposed potential risks to the smooth run of the railway project.”

In Chapter Seven, Alvin Camba et al analyse the debt trap thesis with reference to the Philippines. The authors posit that various analysts have misinterpreted the statements made by the Philippines. In Chapter Eight, Ming Yu Cheng and Kuk Fai Fok analyse Malaysia’s participation in the BRI. The authors give an in-depth analysis of the debt situation in Malaysia. They posit that “Malaysia’s exposure to Chinese debt is manageable and comparatively low.” They warn, however, that Malaysia and China must collaborate to ensure transparency in loan negotiations and disbursements, besides reducing the information asymmetry.

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Candra Fajri Ananda and Risya Fahreza present their case study on Indonesia in Chapter Nine,. They argue that the BRI projects, such as the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail, have yielded economic benefits both locally and nationally. Nonetheless, they say, Indonesia should ensure the long-term financial viability of BRI-related investments and focus on human resource development.

In Chapter Ten, Kazi Mahmud-ur Rahman concludes that Bangladesh requires enormous amounts of capital for its economic and infrastructural development. Despite risks associated with loans, “China is an easy lending partner, as the chances for Bangladesh to borrow from others are slim...Bangladesh is well vigilant of its debt...foreign loans have been on significant rise, while older, cheaper sources of loans and grants have swiftly been on the decline in synchrony with their economic graduations.” He says the Bangladeshi leadership needs to act smartly in terms of effective governance, foreign exchange stability, debt repayment, efficient project implementation and financial transparency to avoid the risk of a debt trap.

Nepal ’ s interaction with China under the BRI has been analysed by Khadga Kc and Hari Prakash Chand in Chapter Eleven. The authors posit that although no projects have started under the BRI so far, the debt trap narrative has already emerged in Nepal. Calling the ‘debt trap’ a myth, the authors urge the Nepalese government to proceed with the BRI projects. However, they suggest, “Nepal should deal with the Chinese counterpart for grants first. The rest of the amount can be managed from soft loans.”

In the final chapter of the book, Michael Mitchell Omoruyi Ehizuelen analyses the potential benefits and challenges of the BRI in developing railway projects, focusing on the Abuja-Kaduna and Lagos-Ibadan Standard Gauge Railway in Nigeria. The author broadly examines the debt burden on the African continent. Ehizuelen dubs debt trap as a myth propagated by anti-BRI countries such as India. His policy recommendations include the inclusion of more stakeholders in BRI projects, making the BRI borrowing more affordable and ensuring project transparency.

This is a timely publication on a pertinent aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative, namely, loans incurred under the BRI by the participating countries. Pakistan's case has not been discussed, though there are passing references to it.

Key takeaways from the edited volume are as follows:

- a) A majority of the BRI borrowers were already in debt owed to Western countries, the Paris Club and US-dominated international financial institutions, such as the World Bank when they undertook BRI participation.
- b) China's share of debt is a recent development. In some countries, such as Cambodia, Chinese debt has been reduced and rescheduled through negotiation.
- c) Several governments facing the challenge of financial crises have sought BRI loans. Some of these have made good use of these loans.
- d) Most of the countries facing debt repayment issues have had political instability, rampant corruption and policy discontinuation.
- e) The BRI debt trap theory is an Indian strategic plan to counter China's rising influence.
- f) Though the BRI has offered significant opportunities to many countries, its implementation is not without challenges, including accumulated debt in some countries including Pakistan.

As policy solutions, the authors recommend meaningful interaction and project-based negotiations between Chinese and other stakeholders.

The book carries valuable insights on debt issues and management. It is recommended for students, scholars and policy practitioners interested in the BRI, the CPEC, regional integration and trans-regional market connectivity.

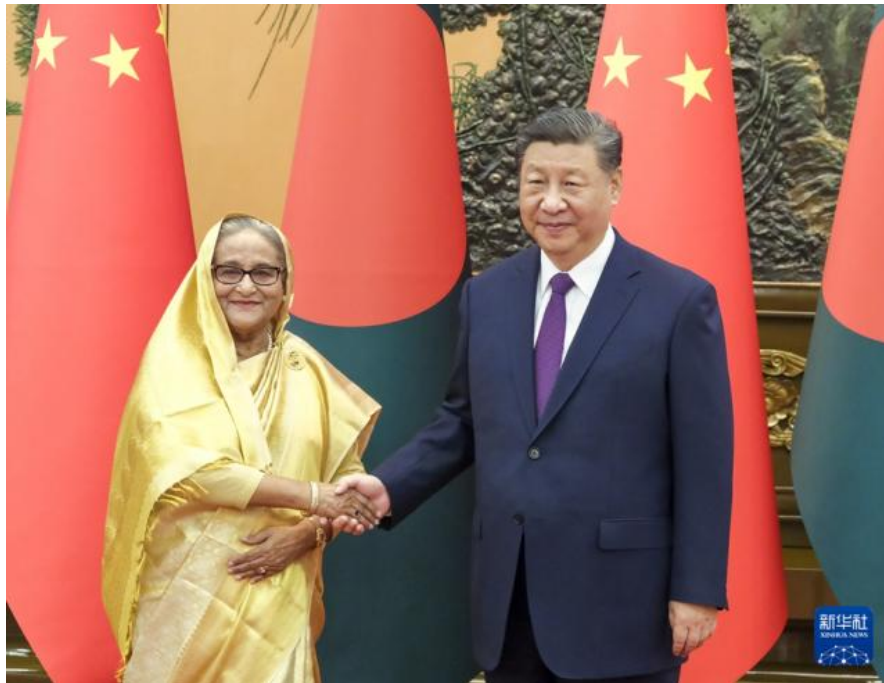
This article was first published at The News, July 14, 2024, Pakistan, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/1208988-investigating-a-debt-trap>(<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/224.html>)

RCAS Commentary

China's Financial Assistance: A Boon or A Bane for Bangladesh?

Sujit Kumar Datta, Jul.19, 2024

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently completed a visit to China (July 8-10, 2024), which held great importance for Bangladesh. The meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping was held Wednesday afternoon at the Great Hall of the People. Xi Jinping made his last discussion at a recent meeting on the sideline of the 15th BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa.



▲ Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (Xinhua News)

The Bangladesh Prime Minister also met with Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang at the Great Hall of the People on Wednesday morning. Li Qiang has announced \$1 billion in financial assistance for Bangladesh, adding new dimensions to Bangladesh's development.

After the meeting, Bangladesh and China signed several Memorandum of Understandings(MoU). Cooperation in the economic and banking sectors, trade and investment, digital economy, infrastructure development, assistance in disaster management, construction of the 6th and 8th

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Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge, agro-export from Bangladesh, and communication among the people have been signed.

In the meeting with Xi Jinping and Li Qiang, all topics regarding bilateral relations were discussed. Issues relating to the Rohingya, business and commerce between the nations, and development cooperation were all raised and discussed at length.

The financial support pledged by PM Li Qiang is a massive opportunity for Bangladesh. Proper and effective use of the funds will add a new dimension to the country's development. However, if not used correctly, it can also cause serious harm. Some mega projects in Bangladesh are not profitable and do not significantly contribute to the country's economy. Therefore, they must consider the country's economy's profitability, implementation, and significance when picking new projects.

Considering the country's history of corruption, experts have warned that corruption will likely increase if such a massive amount of money is not used correctly. Proper and transparent use of this money must be ensured. For this, effective monitoring and accountability systems should be introduced so that no money is wasted or corrupted.

During this visit, 21 MoUs and agreements between the two countries were signed to strengthen cooperation. Under the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) project, infrastructure development will be conducted in Bangladesh. Various more agreements were signed to increase trade and investment. The Education and Cultural Exchange agreement was signed to improve both aspects. China also promised that it will help Bangladesh gain BRICS membership.

In addition, China will back Bangladesh to resolve the Rohingya crisis, and China's role in solving this crisis may be necessary. The Rohingya refugee problem is a severe humanitarian and economic challenge for Bangladesh. If China plays an active role in solving this crisis, it will be a significant boost for Bangladesh.

PM Hasina's visit to China has unveiled a new horizon for Bangladesh. If appropriately used, China's \$1bn financial support will take the country's economy to new heights. Picking need-oriented mega projects, ensuring zero corruption and full transparency, and developing China-

Bangladesh relations are essential for the country's overall development. China's cooperation with Bangladesh has unveiled a new horizon and will positively impact the country's economy. However, the country's development must progress through this opportunity's proper and effective use.

This article was first published at Dhaka Tribune, Bangladesh, July 15, 2024, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/352144/china-s-financial-assistance>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/228.html>)

About Author



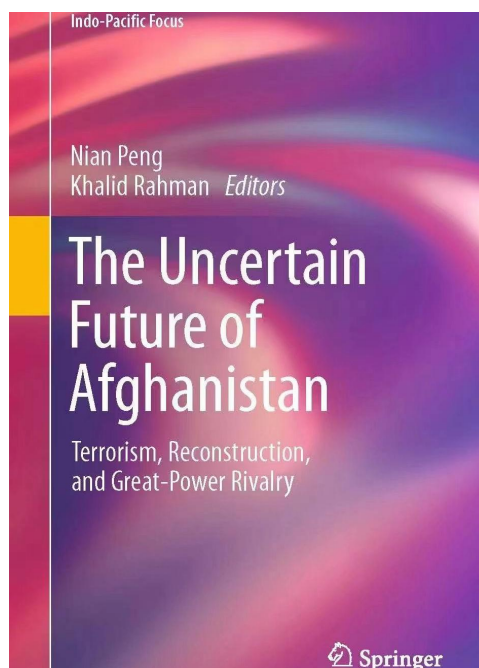
Sujit Kumar Datta is Deputy Director, Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong, and the former Chairman and Professor in the International Relations Department at the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Dr. Datta graduated with a BA (Honors) and MA degree in International Relations from the Jahangiragar University and completed his PhD in International Politics from the School of Political Science and Public Administration, Shandong University, China. After that, he had worked at the BRAC Training Division (BTD) as a faculty member. He had joined in the department of International Relations, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh as a Lecturer in January, 2010. Dr. Datta has authored several articles and book chapters in renowned national and international peer-reviewed journals (Web of Science, Scopus indexed). Email: datta.ir@cu.ac.bd.

RCAS Commentary

Afghanistan Under The Taliban: Is There A Future?

Ejaz Hussain, Jul.23, 2024

Afghanistan suffers from chronic instability since the 1980s if not before. Wars, foreign occupation, civil armed conflict, economic dependency, human rights issues, political and social authoritarian and lingering refugee's crisis have plagued this country for decades. The US-led Western forces failed to stabilise Afghanistan and they ultimately decided to pullout due to various considerations. Consequently, the power vacuum was filled by the Taliban in August 2021 largely due to their sustained resistance awaits foreign occupation. Despite the Taliban in power, Afghanistan's problem persist. More than half of the population is facing starvation due to poor economic base and financial dependence on Western powers. Socially, there is a ban on women education. Politically, no country has formally recognised the Taliban regime so far. These pertinent questions are addressed in *The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry* (Springer, 2024).



▲ The title page of RCAS new book of Afghanistan.

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This edited book analyses the domestic politics and external relations of the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. It touches upon some of the key issues affecting the Taliban regime such as peace negotiations, terrorism threats, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and economic cooperation, policies and projections of the US-led Western powers, strategic and commercial interactions of Russia with the regime as well as responses of the neighbouring countries toward the Taliban 2.0.

The book is professionally edited by Nian Peng and Khalid Rahman. Nian Peng is an Associate Professor and Research Fellow at the Department of Foreign Languages and Research Centre for Indian Ocean Island Countries, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, China. He is also the Director of the Hong Kong Research Centre for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong. His recent publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Springer, 2022) and *The Reality and Myth of BRI's Debt Trap: Evidence from Asia and Africa* (Springer, 2024). His refereed articles have been notably published in *Ocean Development and International Law*, *Pacific Focus*, *Asian Affairs*, etc.

Khalid Rahman is chairperson of the Islamabad-based think-tank, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). He has more than 35 years of experience in research, training, and management. Rahman is also a non-resident fellow of the Research Centre for SAARC States (RCSS), Hainan Normal University, Haikou, and the Research Centre for Social Development of Islamic Countries, Hebei University. He is also editor-in-chief of *Policy Perspectives*.

Thematically, the book is divided into ten chapters. The opening chapter serves as an essential introduction, laying the groundwork for understanding the labyrinth of challenges confronting Afghanistan. It outlines the book's core objectives, presenting a tapestry of key questions that are addressed in the subsequent chapters. These questions delve into the historical context that shaped the rise of the Taliban regime in August 2021, the ideological fault lines that impede peacebuilding efforts, and the multifaceted challenges that hinder Afghanistan's path towards stability and progress. Chapter 2 by Muhammad Azam, based at Sargodha University, delves into the intricate history of Afghan peace negotiations, a saga fraught with missed opportunities and persistent roadblocks. It meticulously dissects the factors that continually thwarted progress

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on the path to peace. Ideological divides between the Taliban and Western democracies emerge as a prominent obstacle. The Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law stands in stark contrast to the ideals of a Western-style democracy, creating an ideological chasm that seems difficult to bridge, argued the author. Furthermore, the presence of US-led foreign forces in Afghanistan is identified as another impediment. Their involvement was viewed with suspicion by Afghans particularly the Taliban, who perceived it as an infringement on their sovereignty. This perception fuelled anti-government sentiment and complicated the peace talks with the US. The chapter further underscores the absence of trust as a critical hurdle. Years of conflict have fostered a deep sense of distrust among key stakeholders, making it challenging to establish a foundation for genuine dialogue and reconciliation. In addition, the chapter sheds light on the complex web of actors and spoilers who have a vested interest in the continuation of the conflict. These actors, both domestic and international, often have agendas that diverge from achieving lasting peace, further complicating peace negotiations.

In Chapter 3, Mansoor Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Tahir Khan shift the focus to the Taliban regime itself, examining the formidable challenges they face in governing war-ridden and poverty-stricken Afghanistan. The authors have identified security concerns remain are still paramount. The presence of numerous terrorist groups, i.e. Al-Qaeda, within Afghanistan's borders poses a significant threat to regional security. Indeed, Pakistan has repeatedly communicated the presence of Kabul-backed TTP inside Pakistani territory. The TTP has killed scores of Pakistani civilian and security personnel in recent years, too. The international community is understandably apprehensive about the Taliban's ability or better willingness, to dismantle these groups. Chapter 3 also explored the issue of international recognition of the Taliban regime. The regime craves legitimacy and a return to the international fold. However, securing recognition from the international community hinges on their ability to demonstrate a commitment to human rights, particularly women's rights, and to establish a more inclusive form of government, argued the authors. In addition, the authors also analysed the economic challenges confronting the war-torn nation-state. Rebuilding Afghanistan's infrastructure and reviving its economy require substantial resources and international investment. The Taliban

needs to navigate a delicate path, attracting foreign investment while simultaneously addressing concerns about corruption and mismanagement.

Chapter 4 by Yu Hong Fu examines the critical issue of security under the Taliban rule, a topic that evokes anxieties within the international community. The chapter explores the international community's concerns about the potential for a spillover of instability and terrorism beyond Afghanistan's borders. The author contends that a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan could become a breeding ground for extremist groups, posing a global security threat. However, the chapter also presents a more nuanced perspective. It suggests that the immediate impact of the Taliban takeover on extremist activities outside Afghanistan may be limited. While online propaganda and radicalisation efforts pose a concern, there is limited evidence of a significant increase in cross-border terrorist attacks in other countries especially the Western world. The chapter goes on to analyse the rise in terrorism within Pakistan since the Taliban takeover. This trend highlights the complex and interconnected security challenges plaguing the region, argued the author. It underscores the need for regional cooperation in addressing these challenges.

Mairaj ul Hamid Nasri delves into a critical retrospective of US intervention in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks in Chapter 5. The chapter offers a candid examination of the shortcomings of US policy, highlighting the immense financial costs and human losses incurred during the long and ultimately unsuccessful war. The chapter dissects the multifaceted objectives of US intervention, drawing a distinction between the stated goal of fostering democracy in Afghanistan and the more covert objective of securing regional influence and controlling access to resources. The chapter goes on to criticise the US policy framework, arguing that it failed to take into account the historical context and cultural nuances of Afghanistan. Imposing a Western model of democracy onto a society with vastly different traditions and political structures proved to be a recipe for failure. The author concludes the chapter with a call for introspection on the part of the US. It emphasises the importance of learning from the mistakes of the past intervention and urges reflection on the role of regional actors in shaping Afghanistan's future. The chapter suggests that a more nuanced approach, informed by a deeper understanding of Afghan history and culture, is necessary for any future engagement with the country.

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Chapter 6 by Xin Yi Qu and Nian Peng carries the discussion forwards with empirical focus on the Belt and Road Initiative in Afghanistan's socioeconomic development. The BRI is a vast infrastructure development project encompassing numerous countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe. The chapter explores the idea that BRI projects could offer a glimmer of hope for Afghanistan, fostering economic growth and regional connectivity. It envisions a form of triangular cooperation between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, where infrastructure projects could create a 'win-win' situation for all the involved stakeholders. For example, China would gain access to new markets and resources; Pakistan would benefit from improved trade routes, and Afghanistan could experience much-needed economic revitalisation via the BRI. Nonetheless, the authors also acknowledged the challenges that lie ahead. For distance, security concerns remain a major obstacle, with the ongoing presence of militant groups posing a threat to the stability of BRI projects. In addition, competition from other regional powers, particularly India, could complicate BRI's implementation in Afghanistan.

Najimdeen Bakare, in Chapter 7, delves into the history of Russia's involvement in Afghanistan, analysing the shift in their strategic posture following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The chapter also sheds light on Russia's renewed strategic interest in Afghanistan after the US invasion in 2001. The NUST-based author argued that Russia views a stable Afghanistan as essential for its own security, particularly in light of the potential for regional instability to spill over into Central Asia, a region with significant Russian interests. Informally recognising the Taliban as a major player in Afghanistan, Russia advocates for engagement with the regime, believing that isolation will only exacerbate the situation. The chapter concludes by emphasising the potential for cooperation between Russia and other regional actors, including China and India, in pursuing the shared goal of a stable Afghanistan for market connectivity and regional economic integration.

Muneeb Yousuf and Nazir Ahmad Mir, New Delhi-based scholars, have analysed the multifaceted relationship between India and Afghanistan and India's concerns about the Taliban's return to power in 2021 in Chapter 8. The chapter identified India's primary security concern as the potential for increased support for separatists in Kashmir from a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. India has provided significant economic and development assistance to

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Afghanistan during the Karzai and Ghani period. The authors also identified the challenges India faces in the current context such as the growing influence of China in the region. The authors concluded the chapter by outlining a potential strategic approach for India, which emphasises the need for the latter to maintain a multifaceted relationship with Afghanistan, balancing its security concerns with continued engagement on developmental issues. In addition, India's soft power initiatives, focused on education and cultural exchange, could prove valuable in fostering long-term positive relations with the Afghan people, argued the authors.

Khalid Rahman, in Chapter 9, analysed the intricate and often troubled relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The author emphasised the historical and cultural ties that bind the two countries, highlighted the porous border region and underscored the shared Pashtun heritage of many Afghans and Pakistanis. The author also acknowledged the complexities of the bilateral relationship. Moreover, Rahman has identified challenges that Pakistan is facing in its partnership with the US post-9/11. In addition, the author argues that a well-defined foreign policy is crucial for Pakistan, which ought to prioritise national interests while also fostering cooperation with Afghanistan on issues of mutual concern such as counterterrorism and managing the refugee crisis.

In the final chapter, Hideaki Shinoda, a Tokyo-based scholar, reflects on Japan's involvement in Afghanistan post-9/11. Despite being a top financial donor, Japan's efforts in Afghanistan faced challenges due to its traditional non-military stance and volatile security situation. Shinoda argues that Japan's experience in Afghanistan impacts its future peace-building efforts. However, he suggests that Japan's role will be more modest, focusing on harmonising with international efforts rather than leading large projects.

Thus, the book reflects diverse perspectives of scholars from China, Japan, and South Asia, providing a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted issues in Afghanistan. Each chapter offers unique insights, contributing to the overall analysis of Afghanistan's complex political, economic, and security landscape. It is a recommended read for students, scholars,

NGOs and policymakers working on Afghanistan, South Asian politics and security, the BRI as well as terrorism and great powers' rivalries.

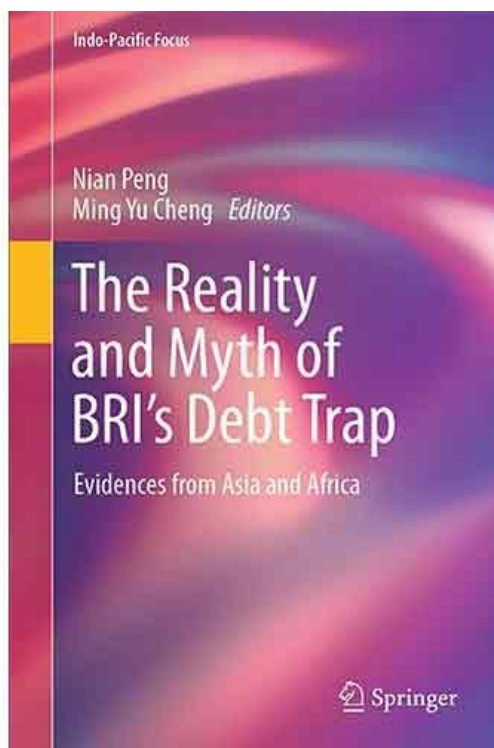
*This article was first published at The Friday Times, July 21, 2024,
<https://thefridaytimes.com/21-Jul-2024/afghanistan-under-the-taliban-is-there-a-future>.(<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/230.html>)*

RCAS Commentary

Debunking the Myth of BRI's 'Debt Trap's

Sujit Kumar Datta, Aug.7, 2024

One of the most talked about aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is its so-called “debt trap.” Many claim that China is establishing political and economic control over developing countries by trapping them in debt through the BRI project. On the other hand, some experts think this is a myth and the claim has no basis in actual evidence. The book, *The Reality and Myth of BRI's 'Debt Trap': Evidences from Asia and Africa*, focuses on this debate. Edited by Nian Peng and Ming Yu Cheng, and published by Springer Nature, the book consists of 12 chapters presenting various aspects of BRI projects and country-based evidence regarding its debt trap.



▲ The title page of RCAS new book on BRI.

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The first chapter discusses the history of BRI and its main objectives. The BRI is a global development strategy launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013. Its main objective is to revive the ancient Silk Road and connect the various countries through modern rail, road, and sea routes.

The second chapter contains misconceptions of BRI's "debt trap"-the Chinese perspective. China claims that BRI projects do not create debt traps but help developing countries prosper economically.

The third chapter analyzes the Debt Trap Theory: The Logic of Power Politics in India. This chapter explains the BRI's "debt trap" theory from India's perspective. India feels China is trying to increase its influence in South Asia through the BRI project.

The fourth chapter explains debt problems in Myanmar and BRI-CMEC. BRI and CMEC projects are analyzed in Myanmar's context. It discusses how BRI projects have created or solved debt problems.

The fifth chapter evaluates debt Management and the BRI in Cambodia. The impact and debt management aspects of BRI projects in Cambodia are discussed in detail. Cambodia sees the BRI projects as an excellent opportunity for its economic development.

The sixth chapter discusses the Laos-China Railway: Legal, Social, Economic and Environmental Perspectives. Various aspects of the Laos-China railway project were discussed. How it affects the economy of Laos and the project's environmental and social impacts are analyzed.

The seventh chapter consults on the debt trap in the Philippines. The implications of BRI projects in the Philippines and the reality of the debt trap theory are discussed. An accurate picture of BRI projects emerges from the experience of the Philippines.

The eighth chapter indicates BRI in Malaysia: Debt Trap or Development Opportunity? Analysis of BRI projects in Malaysia. Malaysia sees the BRI projects as a significant opportunity for economic development and whether these projects create a debt trap. Has been discussed.

Chapter nine designs on statement of credit management and credit risk in Indonesia debt management. Credit risk of BRI projects in Indonesia are discussed. Detailed information on BRI projects' financial impact and credit risk management is presented here.

Chapter ten discusses Bangladesh's debt management and BRI impact. It analyzes the debt management aspects of BRI projects in Bangladesh. It also discusses how BRI projects are helping Bangladesh's infrastructural development and Bangladesh's strategy to address the debt problem.

Chapter eleven illustrates the reality and myths of BRI's "debt trap"-evidence from Nepal. The reality and myth of the concept of the "debt trap" of BRI projects in the case of Nepal are discussed. How BRI projects are implemented in Nepal and the resulting financial impact is analyzed.

Finally, chapter twelve interprets China came, China made: Economic implications of SGR development in the context of the BRI in Africa. The impact of BRI projects in Africa is discussed. In particular, the economic impact of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) project and its role in Africa's development are analyzed.

BRI projects mainly work as a facilitator for infrastructure development in developing countries. China is implementing railway, road, port, and other infrastructure development projects in various countries through these projects. The main objective of BRI projects is to increase trade connectivity and accelerate financial development. However, allegations of a "debt trap" arose against BRI projects. Critics say China deliberately lends large sums of debt to developing countries and seizes the country's vital assets when they default. Various studies and evidence are presented in this book to support these allegations.

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The infrastructure of various countries is being improved through BRI projects. New railways, roads, ports, and other infrastructure are being built, which help the economic development of countries. Trade connectivity between countries is increasing through BRI projects. As a result, the country's economy is becoming dynamic, and international trade opportunities are increasing. The economic development of countries is being accelerated through BRI projects. New job opportunities are being created, and people's incomes are increasing.

The debt burden on the country is increasing through BRI projects. Many countries have trouble repaying these debts and suffer from economic crises. China's political influence is increasing through BRI projects. China's control over developing countries is increasing, and their independence is diminishing. BRI projects are hurting the environment. Creating new infrastructure is causing deforestation, water pollution, and other environmental problems.

The book, *The Reality and Myth of BRI's "Debt Trap": Evidences from Asia and Africa*, clearly explains BRI's "debt trap" reality and myth. This book shows that BRI projects help the infrastructural development of developing countries but also increase the risk of debt and political influence. This book provides readers with an in-depth understanding of the prospects and challenges of BRI projects, which is crucial for readers interested in the subject. This book review provides a clear idea of the realities and myths of BRI projects. It discusses the prospects and challenges of BRI projects, which are of great value to the readers.

This article was first published at Dhaka Tribune, July 28, 2024, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/magazine/arts-and-letters/352890/debunking-the-myth-of-bri-s-%E2%80%98debt-trap%E2%80%99>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/231.html>)

RCAS Commentary

Is Bangladesh Headed for Long-Term Stability?

Sujit Kumar Datta, Aug.13, 2024

After more than 15 consecutive years as Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina was forced out of power by the popular quota reform movement. The main factors behind her downfall were stubbornness, arrogance and overconfidence.



▲ Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus signs the oath book as the country's head of the interim government in Bangladesh at the Bangabhaban, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Aug 8, 2024.

As a result of this action, not only were her political achievements destroyed but the very existence of the Awami League, the leading party in the liberation war, was also threatened. Sheikh Hasina took over as Prime Minister of Bangladesh in 2009 and served three consecutive terms. Under her leadership, the country made significant economic progress. She pushed mega projects such as the Mero Rail, the Padma Bridge, the digital transformation and power sector development.

However, staying in power for so long instilled in her a kind of arrogance and overconfidence, eventually leading to her downfall. She believed her opinion was correct and she would not

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tolerate opposition. Because of this stubbornness and arrogance, she made mistakes in various political decisions, eventually leading to discontent among the people. The crisis was rooted in growing popular unhappiness, allegations of widespread corruption in the government and mass protests against human rights abuses.

Because of increases in the prices of goods, suffering was created in public life, and the dissatisfaction of common people toward the government also increased. In addition, unemployment among educated youth increased, which increased the strength of the movement. All these factors combined this year, and Sheikh Hasina's government faced massive public protests, which eventually forced her to resign.

The primary demand of the quota reform movement is to establish good governance and ensure equal opportunity for all. Satisfying the agitators and implementing their demands will be the government's priority. Time will tell how the interim government led by Dr. Muhammad Yunus will work and reconcile with the agitators. The quota reform movement is a long-standing and complex phenomenon. The solution will depend on effective action by the government and the acceptance of the logical demands of the agitators.

The formation of an interim government under Yunus brought a new turn to the movement. What is to be seen now is how this new government will work and how it will accept the demands of the public. If the new government can take effective steps to ensure good governance and the welfare of the people, it is hoped that the quota reform movement will end soon.

Bangladesh is currently going through extreme political instability. Recently, protests and agitations in the country have gained momentum for various political and social reasons. Two of the main ones are the activities and policies of India and the United States. India-Bangladesh relations have long reflected mixed feelings. Although India has been a strong ally of Bangladesh since its independence, conflicts and tensions have arisen over time on various issues.

The Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system is the central waterway of South Asia. These rivers flow through both India and Bangladesh, and the two have had persistent disputes over water sharing. The two countries have yet to sign an agreement on distributing Teesta River

water, causing significant problems for farmers in northern Bangladesh. This dispute over water distribution has led to strong criticism and anger against India and Bangladesh. Incidents involving the deaths of Bangladeshi citizens at the hands of the Indian Border Security Force occur frequently along the border. The frequency of such incidents has stoked anger and resentment toward India from the people of Bangladesh.

The issue of border killings has created a negative attitude toward India among the ordinary people of Bangladesh. Recently, a memorandum of understanding was signed between India and Bangladesh, allowing Indian trains to run from Bangladesh. The agreement has brought mixed reactions from Bangladeshis. The rise of Islam in Bangladesh and the activities of fundamentalist groups have also had a profound impact in the political and social spheres.

The geopolitical position of Bangladesh is critical. Located in the heart of South Asia, the country maintains a complex relationship with India. It has long maintained close ties with China to help reduce India's influence. China has invested heavily in development projects in Bangladesh, and the new government is keen to continue this relationship. Dr. Yunus's government will be able to maintain balance.

China is playing a significant role in Bangladesh's infrastructure development, trade growth and technology development. The new government will achieve substantial progress in the country's development by maintaining relations with China. Various Chinese projects are underway in Bangladesh, including infrastructure development, power projects and road and railway construction. These projects are contributing significantly to Bangladesh's economy and overall development. Dr. Yunus's government can ensure the country's continued development and security by maintaining close ties with the United States and increasing ties with China.

A strategy for reducing Indian influence will be pursued while maintaining relations with China. It will play an essential role in the country's domestic and international affairs. The future of Bangladesh's relationship with China is bright under the new government's leadership.

Dr. Yunus is an internationally recognized personality and is known as the founder of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. If the new government under his leadership can successfully implement

political reforms, it can bring lasting stability to Bangladesh. However, this process will be long and challenging. The main challenge before the new government will be to gain the confidence of the country's people and bring back a sense of stability.

The people of Bangladesh are currently waiting for change. They want a corruption-free, transparent and democratic government. However, meeting these expectations will take work. The new government has to face many challenges in the coming days. First, economic health must be restored. Also, the education system, healthcare and human rights situation must be ensured. International powers have significantly influenced Bangladesh's political stability. Powers such as India, China and the United States are keenly interested in the political situation. If these international relations are balanced, the country's internal stability may improve. In particular, the geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and China could affect Bangladesh.

Sheikh Hasina's resignation is a turning point for the country. But whether or not this change will bring lasting stability or usher in further instability depends on the new government's performance and the fulfillment of public expectations. The future of Bangladesh now largely lies in the hands of the new government.

This article was first published at China-US Focus, Hong Kong, August 13, 2024, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/is-bangladesh-headed-for-long-term-stability>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/232.html>)

RCAS Commentary

Saudi Arabia Balances Defense Cooperation

Ghulam Ali, Aug.19, 2024

On Aug. 9, the U.S. State Department announced that it was lifting its ban on offensive weapon sales to Saudi Arabia, reversing the Biden administration's three-year-old position. The announcement came less than two months after the Saudi defense minister, Prince Khalid bin Salman, visited China.



▲ The U.S. State Department announced that it was lifting a ban on U.S. sales of offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia on Aug 9, reversing a three-year-old policy to pressure the kingdom to wind down the Yemen war.
(China-US Focus)

Earlier, the administration had briefed members of Congress, as required by law under which all major international weapons deals must be reviewed in advance. This underscores the seriousness with which the U.S. government has been addressing issues of defense collaboration with the Saudis.

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Recently, there has been a flurry of events between the United States and Saudi Arabia. Recently, a senior U.S. interagency delegation met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Jeddah to discuss regional issues and integrated air and missile defenses. This followed a Saudi delegation's visit to Washington to explore cooperation in advanced technologies and artificial intelligence.

In parallel-and most significantly in its ultimate consequences for the Middle East-the two countries have been finalizing a comprehensive defense pact. As widely reported in the media, the proposed pact consists of a bilateral defense agreement, a nuclear deal and the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Under the pact, the U.S. will provide a security guarantee to Saudi Arabia against any attacks.

Although the proposal is not final and faces some high hurdles, including passage by Congress, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia held unprecedented in-depth discussions during the negotiation process on the whole spectrum of their relationship. Saudi Arabia will be legally bound to the U.S. regional security structure and limit any strategic cooperation with China and Russia.

Riyadh no longer tying its options to Washington alone. In late June, Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman visited China and met his Chinese counterpart, Admiral Dong Jun, and other defense officials. Although few details were shared about the discussions, the visit captured attention. The backdrop of intensifying tensions in the Middle East and West Asia, as well as China's growing prestige and its mediation role in the region are notable.

In recent years, China has made inroads in the Saudi defense sector, which once was the sole domain of the United States. Beijing started supplying small-scale weapons to the kingdom. Saudi Arabia purchased combat drones from China, and both sides initiated naval exercises. At the World Defense Show in Riyadh earlier this year, China set up the largest pavilion, while a J-10, one of China's latest fighters, participated in the airshow.

Some analysts reported that China expressed its willingness to sell its HQ-22 air defense system and Wing-Loong-10B drone if Riyadh was interested. China also reportedly assisted Saudi Arabia in the domestic production of ballistic missiles and drones. Although China's share of Saudi Arabia's overall arms industry remains limited relative to a decade ago, it has made notable advancements. For example, its arms transfers to Saudi Arabia increased by nearly 400 percent between 2016 and 2020, compared with transfers between 2011 and 2015.

Saudi Arabia has also expanded its defense partnerships with other prominent weapons producers. In July, Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman and Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan made separate visits to Turkey. The Saudi state-owned defense company SAMI signed agreements with the Turkish companies Baykar, Aselsan and Fergani to localize Saudi defense industries. Riyadh also has had close defense cooperation with France, the UK and South Korea. It even made a last-ditch effort to join the development of a sixth-generation fighter jet initiated by the UK, Italy and Japan.

Saudi Arabia is the fifth-largest spender on defense globally, with an annual expenditure of nearly \$70 billion. It aims to produce 50 percent of its weapons domestically by 2030. In 2017, the kingdom established Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) and held two World Defense Shows, in 2022 and 2024, to expand defense partnerships, attract investment, showcase its defense sector and explore joint ventures with the ultimate goal of domestic arms production.

Among Saudi Arabia's different defense partners, the roles of the U.S. and China could be decisive; moreover, both are locked in a strategic rivalry within the Kingdom. Each has advantages and disadvantages for Riyadh.

The advantages of the United States include its possession of unmatched state-of-the-art defense technology. The U.S. has remained the foremost supplier of weapons to Saudi Arabia, meeting between 70 percent and 80 percent of its needs on average throughout the decades. This long-standing dependence has also synchronized Saudi defense and strategic policies with those of the U.S.

This dependence is further reinforced by America's strategic partnerships with other Arab Gulf states (and in the wider Middle East), many of which are based on formal defense agreements. Further, the U.S. has developed strong connections with the Saudi monarchy, specifically the House of Saud, and has built lobbying networks.

The United States is a popular destination for many Saudis in terms of education, investment and settlement. Most important, the U.S. can offer security guarantees, deploy military platforms such as aircraft carriers and personnel (in significant numbers) and is ready to take military action when required.

On the flip side, the U.S. imposes its policies on recipient countries, leaving little room for maneuver. Its weapons supplies are often subject to the whims of different administrations, which change every four years and the occasional invocation of human rights issues. Further, exports are strictly controlled, there is limited freedom for recipients to use them as desired in a chosen theater. Technology-sharing prospects are scarce and the cost of weapons is high.

Some of the advantages of the U.S. are disadvantages for China. The first and foremost factor that prevents China from deepening its strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies is its reluctance to form military alliances. While this remains a major obstacle in building China's strategic military partnerships worldwide, it is felt keenly in Saudi Arabia, which has historically relied on external security guarantees. Second, China avoids military deployments and even collective security arrangements unless they are mandated by the United Nations. Its only military base outside its territories-in Djibouti-is defensive in nature and is intended to protect its vital energy and trade routes. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that China will deploy its military overseas in the future for the security of Saudi Arabia or any other country.

Although China has significantly improved the quality of its weapons in recent decades, it still lags behind the United States. As a matter of preference, Saudi defense planners seek sophisticated U.S. weapons.

In addition to these shortcomings, China presents several advantages. It strictly follows a policy of noninterference and never links the supply of weapons to a recipient's political systems or internal affairs. Beijing sells weapons without any conditions attached, allowing the recipients to use them as desired. Additionally, Chinese weapons are competitively priced and do not require lobbying from different groups. If an agreement is reached at the governmental level, it represents a conclusive measure for securing supplies.

Notably, China is closely aligned with Saudi Arabia's goal of domestic manufacturing to achieve self-sufficiency. It is willing to share technology, promote local production and readily grant licenses. Taking these advantages into account, along with its steady engagement with Saudi Arabia in a wide range of areas, it brings value to the strategic partnership.

What direction is Riyadh heading? Is it aligning with a particular side when it enters into a defense pact with the United States and tries to maintain balance in its defense relationships with both the U.S. and China?

Responding to these questions, many Western analysts (who generally dominate Gulf studies) believe that Saudi Arabia is using its relationship with China as a bargaining to strengthen its position in negotiations with the U.S. At its core, they argue, the U.S.-Saudi Arabian relationship is strong and will continue to exist. They point to the long-standing, multifaceted and deeply rooted strategic engagement between the two countries, which has been further reinforced by Washington's expanded alliances with other Middle Eastern countries. However, this argument overlooks some key issues:

First, it overlooks the fact that a decline in U.S. power has begun. In fact, one of the reasons behind the resurgence of Gulf monarchies is the weakening of US power. Their defiance of

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various U.S. policies is a testament to this. The argument also fails to acknowledge Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's strong desire for greater autonomy and his intention to have more control over the kingdom's affairs. Additionally, it disregards America's unwavering support for Israel over the years, which has angered the Arab population, especially after the Israeli genocide in Gaza that began in October.

A closer look at Saudi policies in recent years, suggests that the kingdom has been engaging with both the U.S. and China. Riyadh is actively negotiating a draft defense pact with the U.S. while also expanding its defense collaborations and sending its defense minister to China. The fact that the United States is negotiating an unprecedented defense pact with Saudi Arabia-the first treaty with an Islamic country-itself indicates U.S. anxiety about China-Saudi relations and serves as a countermeasure.

The defense pact, whether it is ratified by the U.S. Congress or collapses, will be a decisive moment for Saudi Arabia and broader Middle Eastern politics. Until then, the kingdom will likely strive to maintain balanced defense partnerships with both the U.S. and China in its own best interest.

The article was first published at China-US Focus, Hong Kong, August.16, 2024, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/saudi-arabia-balances-defense-cooperation>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/233.html>)

RCAS Commentary

Chinese General Li's Ill-Timed Visit to Pakistan

Ghulam Ali, Aug. 31, 2024

On August 26, a visiting Chinese military delegation led by General Li Qiaoming, the commander of the People's Liberation Army Ground Force, held meetings with Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Defense Minister Khawaja Asif, and Army Chief General Asim Munir. The delegation also laid down a floral wreath at the Yadgar-e-Shuhada, a memorial to honor fallen soldiers.



▲ President Asif Ali Zardari confers the Nishan-i-Imtiaz (Military) award to Commander of the Ground Forces of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Li Qiaoming at Aiwan-e-Sadr on August 27, 2024.-APP

While these meetings were going on, Pakistan's Balochistan Province, where strategically important Gwadar Port is located, experienced a devastating wave of terrorism. The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), which is fighting for the province's independence, conducted coordinated attacks on security personnel, highways, rail tracks, and laborers hailing from other provinces. These attacks killed at least 73 people. While the BLA has been active since its formation in 2006, these specific attacks were the most severe in magnitude.

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Notably, August 26 marked the 18th anniversary of Nawab Akbar Bugti. A Pakistani politician, Baloch nationalist, and head of the Bugti tribe, Bugti met a tragic end on this day in 2006. On the orders of General Pervez Musharraf, the military raided Bugti's hideout in a cave, which subsequently collapsed, resulting in the deaths of Bugti, his guards, and some army personnel.

The insurgency in Balochistan has been ongoing since Pakistan's early days. Balochistan, which is rich in natural resources but remains Pakistan's least developed province, has long-standing grievances with the central government and, indeed, with the Pakistani military and security agencies. The grievances of the Balochs include abductions of activists, forced disappearances, cultural intrusion, underrepresentation, inequitable resource distribution, and systematic discrimination.

On January 2, 2005, a female doctor, Shazia Khalid, was allegedly raped by unidentified individuals within the highly guarded Pakistan Petroleum Limited (PPL) hospital facility in Sui, Dera Bugti, Balochistan. In conflicting accounts, Balochs accused a Pakistani Army officer of being the culprit, while the military dismissed the entire case as a fabricated attempt to damage the institution's reputation.

In a staunchly traditional Baloch tribe, an incident such as the rape of a woman could invoke a far more severe reaction than any material damage. Akbar Bugti saw the incident as an affront to the honor of the Baloch people and vowed to take revenge. This led him and his supporters into a dangerous confrontation with the Pakistani Army, resulting in his death. The military returned Bugti's body in a locked casket, preventing his family from both seeing his body and attending his quiet burial. His death enraged pro-freedom separatists.

China came into the crossfire inadvertently. In practice, Baloch separatists do not have any direct issues with China. However, owing to the perception of China's affiliation with the Pakistani military, Baloch separatists termed Gwadar and Saindak as China's neocolonial projects. By extension, Chinese workers in Pakistan became victims of Baloch separatist attacks. In addition,

given the significance of Pakistan's relations with China, targeting China brings quick attention to the Baloch insurgency in the international limelight.

In 2007, a year after Bugti's assassination, a confrontation between the military and religious extremists from the Red Mosque (Lal Masjid) once again brought China into Pakistan's domestic quagmire. Students from the Red Mosque started imposing their own moral rules in the capital, Islamabad. They attacked a Chinese-operated massage parlor, accusing it of being a brothel, and kidnapped masseuses. China demanded that General Pervez Musharraf's military government protect its citizens, and Pakistan's haphazard operation to free the mosque from radical students was reportedly conducted at the request of China.

This led Islamist militants to include China as one of their targets. Two weeks later three Chinese were killed in Peshawar. The situation in Xinjiang, gave religious extremists further opportunities to exploit anti-China sentiments. It was in this context that certain transnational militant groups issued threats against China.

Despite very different motives, recent reports indicate that Baloch separatists and religious extremist groups have tacitly aligned with each other. Their targeting of Chinese projects and nationals is one of the points they have in common.

Pakistan claimed the March 2024 suicide bombing that killed five Chinese engineers and their local driver was carried out by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, a religious extremist group with sanctuaries on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Also in March 2024, the BLA attacked Gwadar Port Authority Complex, killing two Pakistani soldiers, and Turbat naval base in Balochistan, killing one Pakistani soldier. In both attacks, the BLA said it was fighting against China's presence in the Baloch homeland.

Although Chinese interests were unhurt on August 26, the parallel visit of the Chinese military delegation and its appearance with Pakistani military officials on the very day of Bugti's death anniversary could perpetuate the perception that China backs the policies of the Pakistani

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military. While Pakistani national broadcasts censored mention of the incidents, Li's delegation would have watched BLA's direct threats to China and the carnage through international media while staying in Pakistan.

Who would have arranged the date for this visit? Bugti's killing is related to Pakistan's domestic politics and the sensitive timing is unlikely to have been noticed by China. The visit would have been organized by the Pakistani military. Whether it was intentionally done as a show of power or unwisely overlooked, the choice of this date for the top military leadership of both countries to stand side by side was poorly thought out. Furthermore, the failure of Pakistani intelligence agencies to detect the largest and most coordinated attacks by the BLA so far compounded the damage.

Sometimes, impressions carry more weight than actions. Dragging China into the quagmire of militancy and terrorism, for which the Pakistani military bears great responsibility, should have been avoided by inviting the Chinese military delegation on a different date.

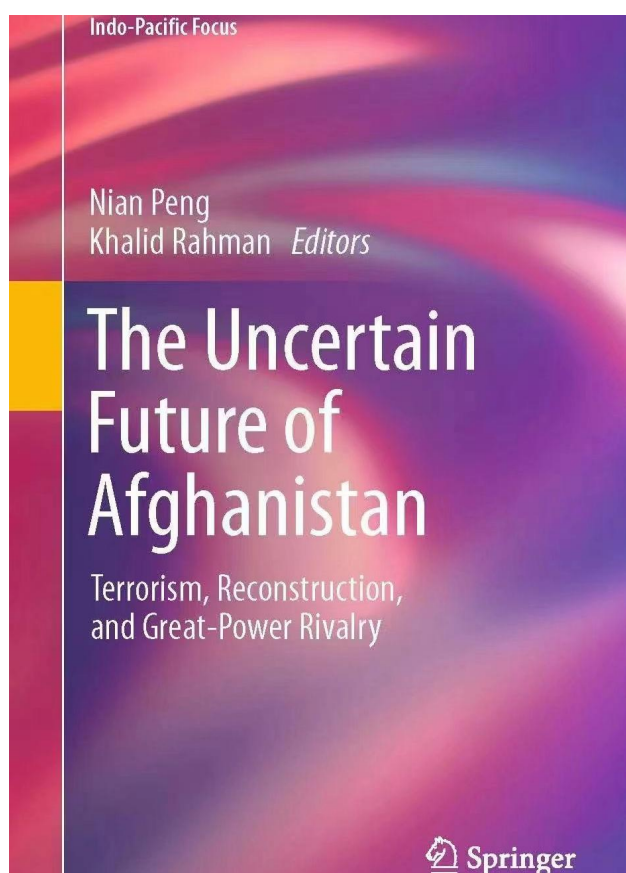
The article was first published at The Diplomat, USA, August.30, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/chinese-general-lis-ill-timed-visit-to-pakistan/>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/234.html>)

RCAS Commentary

Afghanistan's Tightrope

Azam, Muhammad Abrar Zahoor, Sep. 1, 2024

Afghanistan confronts numerous challenges both at home and abroad, despite having emerged from four decades of conflicts and civil wars and with aspirations of a peaceful and prosperous future among its people. *The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry* examines the nation's foreign and domestic policies.



▲ The title page of RCAS new book of Afghanistan.

It discusses the main concerns facing the Taliban government, including peace negotiations, terrorist attacks, collaboration on the Belt and Road Initiatives and the approaches used by major

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powers and neighbouring nations to engage with the new Afghan government, often referred to as Taliban 2.0.

By combining perspectives from government officials, academics and think-tank specialists from China, Japan and South Asian states, the book contributes to the existing body of knowledge.

The contributors come from various disciplines, addressing security issues and regional reactions, primarily focusing on Afghanistan's relations with China, India, Japan, Pakistan, Russia and the United States. The US-Taliban peace negotiations failed for several reasons, including ideological differences, a lack of trust and the involvement of numerous stakeholders and spoilers.

Mansoor Khan and Tahir Khan note that the non-recognition of the Taliban government presents political and legal challenges to launching an ambitious programme and agenda for economic integration and infrastructure development. Currently, capacity limitations severely impact Afghan state institutions. One of the primary reasons for the slow progress of China's economic investments in Afghanistan is the ongoing tensions between the US and China.

There is still much to be done to effectively combat the terrorist organisations operating out of Afghanistan. Relations with Pakistan have deteriorated. However, economic interaction between Iran and Afghanistan has grown. China has attempted to separate the agenda for economic cooperation from political and security issues.

Yu Hong Fu from Shanghai International Studies University observes that terrorist attacks in Pakistan have continued since the Afghan Taliban assumed power, with only a brief interlude. The neighbouring countries of Afghanistan are engaging more actively and positively with the new Taliban government. The Taliban may be able to address global concerns if they cooperate and communicate constructively.

Currently, the Afghan Taliban are the only indigenous force capable of stabilising Afghanistan. It may be crucial for Afghanistan's neighbours to collaborate in exploring ways to support the Afghan Taliban in bringing about change that is more inclusive, open and moderate.

Mairaj ul-Hamid Nasri highlights the disastrous US approach in Afghanistan, noting that the US lost more than 2,400 soldiers and spent over a trillion dollars on its longest conflict. As the number of foreign soldiers in Afghanistan increased, the Afghan National Army-lacking sufficient training, funding and a professional attitude – faced significant challenges.

When the UN secretary-general suggested a 'political settlement,' the US chose to escalate hostilities. Despite repeated acknowledgements by American officials, including President Obama and various generals, that the war in Afghanistan could not be won, the fighting continued.

Xin Qu and Nian Peng point out that China prioritises promoting the growth of human capital through policy coordination, financial aid, people-to-people exchanges and professional training programmes, in addition to developing physical infrastructure. China is interested in accessing Afghanistan's untapped mineral resources. However, China has adopted a cautious approach to implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the country, recognising the significant risks involved. The future of the China-Taliban relationship and the BRI in Afghanistan will be heavily influenced by the global economic slowdown, geopolitical tensions, and the Taliban's ability to effectively govern and address these challenges.

Najimdeen Bakare observes that the Soviet Union's exit from Afghanistan did not entirely diminish Russia's influence in the region. Russia's ongoing relationship with India has served as the primary means of engagement with successive Afghan governments. The US invasion of Afghanistan prompted Russia to develop strategic interests in the area, making it crucial for Russia to reassert itself both economically and strategically. While relations between Russia and the Taliban were previously tense, Russian policy shifted due to the Taliban's growing influence.

Russia is now mending fences with Kabul. The author concludes that cooperating with Moscow will benefit regional actors.

Muneeb Yousuf and Nazir Ahmad Mir of a New Delhi think tank remark that during the first period of Taliban rule, New Delhi withdrew its missions, a decision influenced in part by the close cooperation between the Taliban and Pakistan's security institutions. India appears to have decided to limit its involvement in development and humanitarian initiatives for now while keeping other options open for the future.

Khalid Rahman notes that Pakistan has been walking a tightrope with its post-9/11 policies in Afghanistan. As the US-Taliban conflict dragged on, Washington began complaining about Pakistan's perceived shortcomings. Throughout the 20-year campaign, Islamabad appeared to be in a constant state of delicate balancing. With a renewed sense of self-assurance, groups like the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan and the Islamic State reemerged, acquiring modern and sophisticated US weaponry left behind by American soldiers. Consequently, the past two years have seen an alarming rise in terrorist attacks in Pakistan.

Hideaki Shinoda examines Japan's approach to Afghanistan after 2001 and notes that the country's initial motivation was a desire to maintain alignment with the United States. After 2009, both nations expressed a desire to withdraw from Afghanistan sooner rather than later. By that time, Japan had reverted to its customary low-key approach to international security matters.

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RCAS Commentary

Premier Focuses Middle East Visit On Business

Ghulam Ali, Sep. 25, 2024

Chinese Premier Li Qiang recently made his debut visit to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The visit took place during a period of significant upheaval in the broader Middle East, with Israel's brutal war on Palestine nearly a year old, rising concerns about the widening of hostilities between Israel and Iran and the U.S. finalizing a "historic" defense treaty with Saudi Arabia to increase American influence in the kingdom. Despite these geopolitical challenges, Li's visit focused on expanding trade, business, investment and diplomacy.



▲ Chinese Premier Li Qiang arrives at the King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Sept. 10, 2024. Li arrived here Tuesday to chair the Fourth Meeting of the High-Level Chinese-Saudi Joint Committee and visit Saudi Arabia at the invitation of Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud. (Xinhua/Rao Aimin)

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This reflects China's broader policy of prioritizing economic cooperation over geopolitical entanglement with Arab states in the Persian Gulf region. This trend is also prominent in the Gulf countries' policies toward China.

In China's political hierarchy, Li is the second-most important leader after President Xi Jinping. The visit was, therefore, the first high-level visit from China to Saudi Arabia after China brokered a deal in March last year to restore Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations, a significant development with a far-reaching impact on the region.

In Saudi Arabia, Li met with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, co-chaired a meeting of the high-level Saudi-Chinese joint committee, held talks with the secretary general of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Mohamed Albudaiwi and co-chaired the Gulf-Chinese talk session. The high-level Saudi-Chinese joint committee, which is hosted in turn, focuses on cooperation in politics, trade, investment, energy, culture and technology.

Highlighting Saudi Arabia's significance in China's diplomacy, Li said, "China puts the development of relations with Saudi Arabia as a priority in its overall diplomacy, especially in its Middle East diplomacy." He expressed support for Saudi Arabia's desire for a greater role in regional and international affairs and emphasized the need for multilateral coordination, unity among Asian nations, the joint upholding of international fairness and justice and the promotion of global governance in a more just and reasonable direction. Both Saudi Arabia and China resolved to strengthen their comprehensive strategic partnerships across all fields.

Saudi Arabia and China are the largest trading partners in the region. According to Arab News, two-way trade in 2023 reached \$97 billion, with Saudi exports (mostly oil) were valued at \$54 billion and its imports from China reached \$43 billion. By June this year, Saudi-China trade reached \$48 billion, with Saudi exports to China totaling \$24 billion and imports from China amounting to \$24 billion.

Saudi Arabia is China's second-largest crude oil supplier. Its oil supplies to China decreased slightly as a result of the Ukraine-Russia war. China increased its imports of relatively cheaper Russian oil. Starting in October, Saudi oil exports to China will increase by 7 percent, rising from the current 43 million barrels per month to more than 46 million barrels.

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Developments in Saudi-China relations over the past few weeks alone signal a burgeoning relationship. In August, Saudi Arabia's public investment fund, a sovereign wealth fund of approximately \$925 billion in assets (with an office in China), signed a whopping agreement worth \$50 billion with China's top financial institutions: the Agricultural Bank of China, Bank of China, China Construction Bank, China Export and Credit Insurance Corporation, the Export-Import Bank of China, and Industrial and Commercial Bank of China.

In early September, Saudi Minister of Industry and Mineral Resources Bandar bin Ibrahim Alkhorayef visited Beijing and Hong Kong to explore prospects for cooperation in various sectors. Meanwhile, cultural exchanges are reaching new heights. Beijing has sent 175 Chinese language teachers, and the Chinese language instruction has officially begun at public-sector educational institutions. Moreover, China is setting up electric vehicle plants in Saudi Arabia, while the kingdom is making significant investments in China's oil and refinery sector as part of its downstream strategy.

In this mutually beneficial relationship, Chinese companies also stand to profit. In just one example, Huawei's revenues from cloud computing increased almost tenfold in 2023 and is projected to double again this year.

In the UAE, Li held meetings with President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed and Vice President and Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Both sides underscored the importance of expanding collaboration in trade, renewable energy, technology and culture, with a particular focus on mutual development strategies.

The Chinese premier also addressed the UAE-China business forum, which was attended by more than 200 delegates. The forum was arranged by Dubai Chambers, the China Chamber of Commerce for Import and Export of Machinery and Electronic Products and the Ministry of Economy of the UAE. Li said relations with the UAE were at a "historic juncture" and urged the business sector to seize major upward trends and opportunities. He expressed China's willingness to share development opportunities with the UAE for mutual benefit, welcoming more UAE investment in China and encouraging Chinese enterprises to invest and do business in the UAE.

Li's visit to the UAE coincided with the 40th anniversary of China-UAE diplomatic relations. Over the past four decades, China and the UAE have signed more than 130 bilateral agreements or MOUs. During President Xi's visit to the UAE in July 2018, the relationship was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Sheikh Mohammed subsequently visited China in 2019 and again this year.

The UAE, which started reforms earlier than Saudi Arabia did, has become an attractive destination for Chinese businesses and entrepreneurs. More than 15,500 Chinese companies operate in the UAE, and 1.2 million Chinese tourists visited the country last year.

For many years, the UAE has been China's largest export market and second-largest trading partner in the Middle East, and it is China's fifth-largest source of oil. In 2023, China-UAE trade reached nearly \$95 billion. In the first half of this year, the figure topped \$50.1 billion.

In August, Jebel Ali Port in the UAE became the first to receive China's newly constructed giant Min Jiang Kou vessel, which carried 4,800 vehicles. China is building two of the world's largest solar energy projects in the UAE: the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park and the Noor Abu Dhabi solar plant. The UAE has also become an export destination for China, with tons of fresh fruits and vegetables from China carried to the UAE every week.

On Sept. 10, the day Li embarked for Saudi Arabia, the UAE's national bank (RAKBank) executed the first international remittance using China's digital yuan (eCNY) in exchange for Digital Dirham through the mBridge platform. The mBridge is a multinational wholesale payment solution jointly built by Thailand, China (including Hong Kong) and the UAE. Saudi Arabia joined later. Through this method, transactions can be made directly from the sending bank to the recipient bank without involving corresponding banks and intermediaries.

This trend, along with overall financial arrangements such as currency swaps, increasing demand for trade in local currencies, digital currencies and coordination among banking sectors, will facilitate business and reduce dependence on the U.S. dollar.

One of the obstacles to further accelerating trade is the slow progress in negotiations for a free trade agreement. In both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Premier Li stressed the need to expedite

negotiations for an FTA between China and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Since 2005, China has been pursuing an FTA with GCC countries, but Saudi Arabia, which aims to establish itself as a manufacturing hub in the region, is concerned that inexpensive Chinese goods will inundate the kingdom, thereby impacting its local industries. Li's visit has renewed the call for continuing negotiations.

All three countries, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and China, are introducing structural reforms to attract further investment. Notably, the Chinese premier said that China will further ease market access by eliminating all market access restrictions on foreign investment in manufacturing and quality services for foreign businesses.

Li also showcased China's enormous market of 1.4 billion people and the deep reforms that ensure the safety of foreign investments. Saudi Arabia has enacted legislation to further lure foreign investments and attract talent by offering citizenship and opening up society by removing taboos—moves that were unimaginable a few years ago.

The new legislation has made the country attractive both regionally and globally. In 2022, the UAE was put on the Financial Action Task Force's gray list. As a result of swift government reforms, it was cleared this year.

The United States, a key rival of China in the region, has a strong military presence in all Gulf states and has further expanded that in recent years. As mentioned before, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia are finalizing a defense pact that would legally bind Saudi Arabia to U.S. policies in the region, similar to American arrangements with Japan and South Korea in East Asia. In August, the U.S. had the rare presence of two aircraft carriers in the Middle East—though only for a short period—aimed at defending Israel against a potential Iranian attack. Despite these obvious strategic overtures, China has rarely responded in geostrategic terms.

A closer look shows that contemporary Chinese policy toward the Arab Gulf states stems from its own calculations rather than being a reaction to U.S. policies in the region. China is focused on economic, trade, investment, technology and diplomatic cooperation, along with limited military ties. This approach also suits the Arab states well, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE,

which are undergoing transformations in which China can play an important role. Premier Li Qiang's visit reinforces this trend.

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<https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/premier-focuses-middle-east-visit-on-business>.(<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/236.html>)*

RCAS Commentary

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

Nian Peng, Sep. 25, 2024

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.

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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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RCAS Commentary

China, U.S. Should Get Together on AI

Nian Peng, Sep. 28, 2024

In August, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, and both sides agreed to hold the second round of the U.S.-China Governmental Dialogue on Artificial Intelligence and other institutional arrangements at an appropriate time.



▲ Wang Yi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, holds a new round of China-US strategic communication with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in Beijing, capital of China, Aug 27, 2024.
[Photo/Xinhua]

Three months ago, China and the United States initiated their first round of governmental dialogues on AI, a good beginning for bilateral cooperation in promoting “AI for Good” between the two leading actors in AI. The dialogues demonstrate that both China and the U.S. share common interests in AI, though their bilateral ties are dominated by fierce strategic competition.

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Actually, there is room for China and the U.S. to cooperate on AI, as both sides face the global challenges it poses, such as privacy protection, data security, and ethical issues. Nonetheless, cooperation still faces uncertainties due to fluctuations in relations. In fact, they have not yet formulated a regular mechanism on AI cooperation and only recently had their first round of dialogue on the subject.

What's more, deep mutual distrust is a major barrier for AI cooperation between China and the United States. Although the U.S. initiated the AI dialogue with China, it has not abandoned its containment policy on China's AI development. So it is reasonable for China to be suspicious about America's true intentions on AI dialogue.

Given the uncertainties and mistrust on AI cooperation, both governments should demonstrate a firm commitment to holding long-term intergovernmental dialogues. Both sides should contemplate instituting a long-term mechanism that minimizes disruptions, suspensions or terminations arising from a deterioration in bilateral relations.

They should also consider expanding dialogue channels to increase the certainty and continuity of cooperation. Apart from the existing governmental dialogue organized by China's Department of North American and Oceanian Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the corresponding U.S. agencies within the Department of State and the White House, a 1.5-track dialogue mechanism could be established at a subordinate level.

Led by the deputy director of China's Department of North American and Oceanian Affairs and U.S. counterparts, this mechanism could involve staff from other relevant Chinese government agencies such as the Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Ministry of Commerce and the Cyberspace Administration of China, as well as university professors and think tank experts, senior managers and engineers from the top AI companies of both countries. Multiple discussion groups could be formed based on different topics to facilitate specific in-depth discussions and propose practical solutions.

Beyond maintaining intergovernmental dialogues, non-governmental AI exchanges between China and the U.S. should also be enhanced. Facilitating non-governmental channels could broaden cooperation opportunities and improve public perceptions of AI in both countries.

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The report on the 2-track dialogue released in April by Tsinghua University's Center for International Security and Strategy showed that both sides have achieved consensus and progress in four areas: identifying the potential security risks of AI, clarifying AI terms, analyzing conflict mechanisms and controlling measures related to the military use of AI and exploring the path of AI security governance.

Chinese universities and think tanks, particularly those with expertise in AI, can collaborate with relevant U.S. institutions. Leading AI enterprises in China, including Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent, can also attempt AI exchanges with top U.S. companies.

So far, China and the U.S. have incorporated security governance and ethical norms on AI into their institutional frameworks through laws, regulations, and policy documents, aiming to establish a globally coordinated and efficient AI governance system. In that case, China and the U.S. might want to consider forming a similar mechanism like the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council — in which both sides have achieved phased consensus on the core issues on AI governance — to deepen cooperation on that matter.

The potential cooperative areas mainly include AI system auditing standards, joint testing mechanisms and shared indicator databases for credibility and risk management methodologies. These low-sensitivity areas might provide a breakthrough for cooperation.

Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the difficulties involved in China-U.S. cooperation on AI governance. Beyond the differences in their respective laws and regulations on core issues, including the ownership of patents, the definition of copyright and infringement liability, America's "pan-securitization" on cooperation in all fields is yet another main obstacle for AI cooperation. Both sides should focus more on the ethnic issues of AI governance at the early stage of bilateral AI cooperation.

In short, AI cooperation has emerged as an area with high potential for China-U.S. relations. It would have a lasting impact. Therefore, both sides should take more effective measures to promote it to generate positive energy for bilateral ties and future human development.

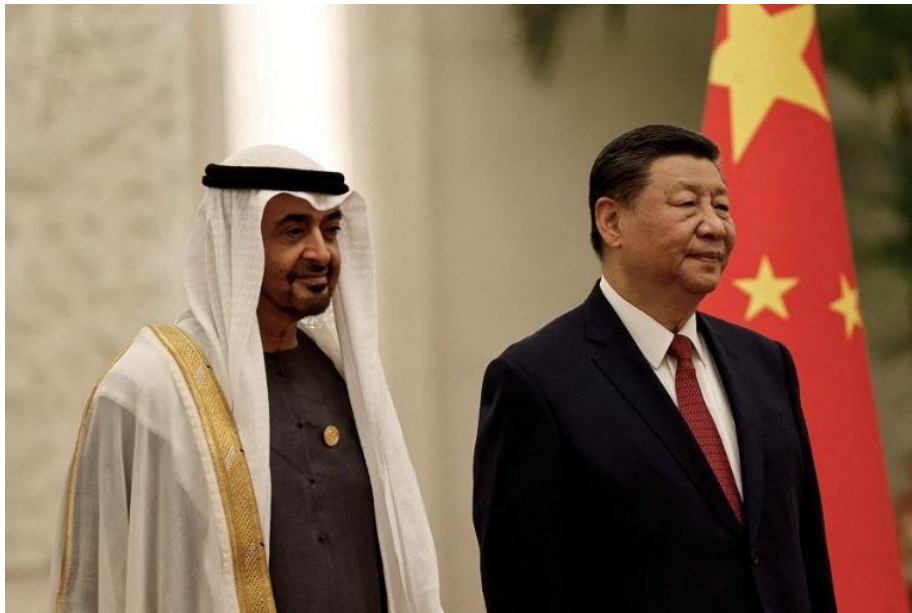
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<https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/china-us-should-get-together-on-ai>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/240.html>)*

RCAS Commentary

Mutual Interests: China-UAE Ties Strengthen amid Western Pressure

Ghulam Ali, Oct. 12, 2024

On 1 November 1984, China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) established diplomatic relations. China opened its embassy in Abu Dhabi in April 1985, and the UAE opened its embassy in Beijing in March 1987. Currently, the UAE has consulates in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Guangzhou and China has a consulate-general in Dubai. Over the past 40 years, the two countries have expanded their relationship in all fields.



▲ United Arab Emirates President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Chinese President Xi Jinping attend a welcome ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, on 30 May 2024. (Tingshu Wang/Pool/Reuters)

High-level visits between both countries, which began early on, played an important role in the development of bilateral relations. Chinese President Yang Shangkun was the first Chinese head of state to visit the UAE in 1989. The following year, in 1990, the UAE's founding father and first president, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, visited China. This was the first visit by any leader from the Arab Gulf states to China.

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Other significant visits that strengthened the relationship included President Xi Jinping's trip to the UAE in 2018. On that occasion, both sides elevated their relationship to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" representing the highest level of diplomatic ties. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited China several times as the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and again in May 2024 as the president of the UAE. Over the past 40 years, both sides signed nearly 150 bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding.

Common position on major issues

China and the UAE back each other's core issues. The UAE has endorsed the "one China" policy, opposed any form of "Taiwan independence" and advocated for peaceful reunification. China offered indirect support to the UAE in its territorial dispute with Iran over the sovereignty of three strategically located islands in the Persian Gulf: Abu Musa, Lesser Tunb and Greater Tunb. The joint statement issued at the China-GCC summit during Xi's visit to Saudi Arabia in 2022 emphasised a "peaceful solution" to the disputes.

China maintained this position on other occasions as well, such as in the China-UAE statement after the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum earlier this year, provoking irritation from Iran. China has no direct stakes in the dispute and adopts this difficult position ostensibly to please GCC countries, which support the UAE's efforts for a peaceful settlement. Iran, on the other hand, asserts that these islands are an integral part of its territory.

The China-UAE relationship is also expanding into the defence sector. In August 2023, both sides held the first-ever joint air exercise, "Falcon Shield". They held the second series in July 2024 in China, indicating it is becoming a regular feature. The UAE purchased the L-15, a light attack multirole aircraft, from China. In the context of the UAE's dispute over the purchase of 50 F-35 jets from the US, it has shown interest in buying China's J-20 stealth fighter.

Diplomatic niceties, symbolic gestures, and rhetoric are important aspects of this relationship. During President Xi's visit in 2018, Abu Dhabi welcomed him with a 21-gun salute, arranged a state banquet, displayed Xi's image on an LED screen nearly the full height of the 65-story Adnoc Headquarters, renamed a mobile network "WelcomePresChina", and bestowed upon him the "Order of Zayed", the UAE's highest civil decoration.

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During President Sheikh Mohammed's May 2024 visit, he described China as his second home and Xi termed China-UAE relations as a model. In the past two years, the UAE celebrated the Chinese Lunar New Year and this year's Mid-Autumn Festival by illuminating the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building in Dubai.

Cultural ties and people-to-people exchanges are also on the rise. Well over a million Chinese tourists visited the UAE in 2023. Currently, more than 350,000 Chinese residents live in the UAE. More than 210 monthly flights operated by UAE national airlines connect the two countries. In response to the increasing demand, both sides are expanding the number of flights. Chinese culture and language are receiving attention in the UAE. Since the UAE launched its Chinese language programme in 2019, over 71,000 students across 171 schools have enrolled in it.

Closer through China-led groupings and trade

The UAE is gradually coming under China-led multilateral institutions. It joined the BRI in 2015 and became one of the founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. In May 2023, the UAE became a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and, in 2024, became a full member of the BRICS group, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

China and the UAE are also connected through the China-Arab States Summit and the China-GCC Summit. China invited the UAE as a "special partner country" at the 21st China-ASEAN Expo held in September 2024 in Nanning, China. This was the first time a GCC delegation attended the event.

The growth of bilateral relations can be measured by trade, which reached about US\$95 billion in 2023. Notably, of this amount, the volume of non-oil trade was US\$80.6 billion, reflecting a 12% increase compared to the previous year. This represents an 800-fold increase since the establishment of diplomatic ties. The two countries aim to increase trade to US\$200 billion by 2030. From 2003 to 2022, the UAE made US\$11.4 billion in investments in China, while China invested US\$6.9 billion during the same period.

China-UAE relations have expanded to encompass all conceivable areas. Both countries have signed currency swap agreements, financial and digital cooperation agreements, joint investment deals, stock exchange partnerships, tourism initiatives, new economy collaborations, entrepreneurship programmes, aviation agreements, logistics partnerships, collaborations in AI and emerging technologies, and infrastructure projects such as digital networks, ports and construction.

Complementarities amid US intervention

The mutuality of interests in the changing global power dynamics brings both sides closer together. China, faced with US and Western tariffs, sanctions and denial of technology, is drawn to the UAE, which offers a favourable investment environment and serves as a leading financial hub in the Middle East. It is no wonder that 60% of China's trade in the region transits through the UAE.

China's vast market, economic clout, willingness to transfer technology, and no-strings-attached policy on one hand, and its expertise in renewable energy, infrastructure and scientific research on the other, complement the UAE's economic diversification. Moreover, the nature of the regimes in both countries ensures political stability and policy consistency, while non-interference further supports the development of the relationship.

What can threaten this relationship? The US has remained the foremost strategic partner of the UAE throughout history. As the US noticed China's deepening footprint in the UAE, particularly in the AI and defence sectors, it took measures to curtail this influence. At the US's intervention, the UAE's state-owned G42 divested from China and signed a hefty US\$1.5 billion deal with Microsoft in April this year.

During UAE President Sheikh Mohammed's visit to the US in September 2024, the US took further steps to entice the UAE. The US designated the UAE as a "major defence partner", a status that would enhance military cooperation, interoperability, and advanced weapons transfers, and could revive negotiations for the F-35. The two countries also announced a partnership to lead global advancements in artificial intelligence (AI).

While some analysts suggested these developments would curb China's role, a Foreign Affairs article argues it would have little effect, as private companies from both sides would continue to cooperate-in the case of the G42, know-how could still flow to firms in the UAE with deeper links with Chinese investors.

Whether the UAE will choose a side-less likely given the rising multipolarity and relative decline in US power-or maintain a balanced relationship with both powers, as is the case for most Arab Gulf states, will be observed as it celebrates its 40th anniversary of diplomatic ties with China.

The article was first published at Think China, Singapore, October.9, 2024, [\(https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/mutual-interests-china-uae-ties-strengthen-amid-western-pressure?ref=top-hero\)](https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/mutual-interests-china-uae-ties-strengthen-amid-western-pressure?ref=top-hero). (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/244.html>)

RCAS Commentary

ASEAN-China Summit in Laos: Focusing on Cooperation

Amid Global Challenges

Nian Peng, Oct. 17, 2024

The 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits and Related Summits were held in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, from 9 to 11 October. At the sidelines of the 27th ASEAN-China Summit, China and the ASEAN member states jointly issued the Joint Statement on the Substantial Conclusion of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) 3.0 Upgrade Negotiations, a landmark achievement for trade and investment cooperation between China and ASEAN.



▲(L-R) Myanmar's Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs Aung Kyaw Moe, Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, Chinese Premier Li Qiang, Laos' Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone, Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Manet, Indonesian Vice President Ma'ruf Amin and Prime Minister of Timor-Leste Xanana Gusmao stand for a group photo during the 27th ASEAN-China Summit at the National Convention Centre in Vientiane, Laos, 10 October 2024. (Athit Perawongmetha/Reuters).

South China Sea issue vs cooperation and development

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However, some participants brought up the South China Sea (SCS) disputes, which shifted attention away from the primary focus on peace and development at the ASEAN Summits. During the meeting with Southeast Asian leaders on 11 October, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken criticised China's increasingly dangerous and unlawful activities in the SCS for injuring people and harming vessels from ASEAN nations.

The day before that, Philippine President Marcos Jr, the closest ally of the US, also raised the issue in the meeting with Chinese Premier Li Qiang, arguing that China cannot pretend that all is well on the economic front when there are tensions on the political front.

While the US and the Philippines sought to highlight the South China Sea disputes as part of the "China threat", most ASEAN leaders chose to steer clear of intense discussions on this issue during the summit.

For a long time, the ASEAN summits have been themed on cooperation and development, focusing on economic development and regional integration rather than highlighting and provoking geostrategic confrontation.

For instance, this year's summit theme, "ASEAN: Enhancing Connectivity and Resilience", underscores the leaders' commitment to improving cross-border connectivity and strengthening the region's industrial resilience, contributing to long-term prosperity and stability.

As Thongloun Sisoulith, president of Laos and the rotating chair of ASEAN, said in his opening address in Vientiane, ASEAN should continue to uphold its common cause of peace, stability and sustainable development, and commitment to multilateralism based on equality and mutual benefit. He said ASEAN countries should further strengthen cooperation grounded in the principles of "the ASEAN Way" to enhance ASEAN unity, solidarity and centrality.

Increasing connectivity amid China-US rivalry

Against the backdrop of the restructuring of the global supply chain and industrial chain since the China-US trade war, ASEAN countries are committed to deepening cooperation on the industrial chain with China to maintain sustained economic growth.

Moreover, ASEAN countries are eager to strengthen cooperation with China on the digital economy, green economy and artificial intelligence (AI) to promote sustainable development amid a new round of scientific and technological revolution led by AI.

Prior to this, China and ASEAN have made significant progress in physical connectivity in the past three years, laying a solid foundation for the rapid development of regional economic integration. As Chinese Premier Li said in his speech at the summit, China and ASEAN should build a multidimensional connective network to pave the way for Asia's future development.

With the opening of the China-Laos Railway and its connection with the China-Thailand Railway, and the feasibility study of the China-Vietnam Railway, the cross-border connectivity between China and ASEAN will be greatly accelerated in the future, thus adding strong engines to ASEAN's economic growth.

Since the US proposed the "Indo-Pacific strategy" in 2017, Southeast Asian nations have faced rising pressures to take sides between China and the US. On the one hand, the US announced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) to compete for influence with China in the Southeast Asian markets, on the other hand, it destabilised the SCS by supporting some claimants' provocative actions against China in the disputed waters.

Vigilant about efforts disrupting regional peace and stability

Such actions not only weaken ASEAN's centrality in maintaining peace and development in the region, but also generate differences among ASEAN member states, thereby increasing uncertainty about the future development of ASEAN.

In recent years, only the Philippines has been notably active in raising issues in the SCS since Marcos Jr took office two years ago, while other claimant states have remained relatively quiet. Although Marcos sought to form a "united front" against China with Vietnam and Malaysia regarding the South China Sea, he did not secure their support.

Conversely, all the newly elected leaders of Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia visited China and vowed to upgrade bilateral ties. For most ASEAN member states, cooperation takes precedence over competition when navigating great power rivalries in the region.

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Notably, just before the summit, Indonesia's Jakarta Post published an editorial titled "No to Asia's NATO", criticising the "Asian version of NATO" proposed by Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and cautioning against introducing this concept during the ASEAN Summit. This highlights that ASEAN states are keeping a close eye on any attempts to disrupt peace and stability in the region.

Urgent issues to tackle

In fact, ASEAN's top priority is far from the SCS dispute. More pressing issues, such as the Myanmar crisis and telecommunication scams, require urgent and appropriate solutions.

Since the military coup in 2021, ASEAN has been striving to promote peace, stability and unity in Myanmar through diplomatic mediation. China has backed ASEAN's efforts to take the lead in addressing the Myanmar crisis.

However, escalating tensions between the military and anti-government forces, including the People's Defence Forces and certain ethnic armed groups supported by the US, have made ASEAN's peaceful diplomatic mediation increasingly challenging.

Telecommunication scams in several Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, have become a "cancer", undermining social stability and hindering people-to-people exchanges among these nations.

During the summit, Thailand and Laos pledged to work together to combat cross-border telecommunication scams and tackle the major issues affecting both countries. Previously, China collaborated with the Philippines, Myanmar and Laos to repatriate criminals involved in these scams. It is clear that China and ASEAN states have agreed to collaborate on addressing telecommunications scams, which will help maintain social stability within ASEAN countries and enhance people-to-people exchanges with China.

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RCAS Commentary

China-Saudi Cultural Ties Enter A New Era

Ghulam Ali, Oct. 20, 2024

Saudi films will be screened in China for the first time in late October, starting in Beijing, Shanghai and Suzhou, before being shown in theaters across the country, the world's largest cinema market. These events are part of the efforts by China and Saudi Arabia to promote cultural exchanges and strengthen people-to-people connections, an area in which significant progress has been made over the past year.



▲ Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met with visiting Chinese Premier Li Qiang in Riyadh on September 11, 2024. Image via the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (China-US Focus)

Saudi films will be screened in China for the first time in late October, starting in Beijing, Shanghai and Suzhou, before being shown in theaters across the country, the world's largest cinema market. These events are part of the efforts by China and Saudi Arabia to promote cultural exchanges and strengthen people-to-people connections, an area in which significant progress has been made over the past year.

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In August 2023, the national flagship airline, Saudi Arabian Airlines, made its first direct flights to China. In November, the Saudi Tourism Authority held its first international promotional campaign in Shanghai, attracting 80,000 visitors. The overall campaign reached 500 million Chinese and significantly increased bookings to the Kingdom by 277 percent.

An important turn in China-Saudi cultural relations came with the visit of Saudi Arabia's minister of culture, Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Farhan, to Beijing in March last year. On that occasion, the cultural ministries of both countries signed a memorandum of understanding to increase collaboration on libraries, cultural institutions, visual arts, performing arts, theater, architecture, design and traditional arts and crafts.

Riyadh announced the creation of the Prince Mohammed bin Salman Award — an annual honor to be given for cultural research; artistic and creative works; translations between the two languages; and naming the cultural personality of the year (one individual from each country). China also invited Saudi Arabia to be guest of honor at the Beijing Book Fair 2024, which was held in June.

Starting with the first direct flight to Saudi Arabia in April, the number of weekly direct flights operated by China's national carriers increased to four. Cathay Pacific will resume another direct flight. In an agreement signed between the aviation departments of both countries in February, Riyadh and Beijing pledged to increase air transportation stops, expand cooperation in air freight and add more routes and flights. Saudi Tourism Minister Ahmed Al-Khateeb said there will soon be more direct flights to China. Airlines operate on a commercial basis, so the rising number of direct flights indicates demand on both sides.

In August, the Saudi Ministry of Education announced the incorporation of Chinese language courses into primary and secondary school curricula. Under the MoUs, China sent the first batch of 175 trained teachers to Saudi Arabia, part of a total commitment of 800 teachers. The same month, the Saudi-Chinese Media Entrepreneurs Forum launched a media business accelerator to assist entrepreneurs in the media sector by providing resources, mentorship and exchanges of expertise between the two countries.

In September, the Saudi Ministry of Culture’s Museums Commission arranged an art exhibition titled “Writings of Today Are a Promise for Tomorrow.” The exhibition highlighted how China and Saudi Arabia place great importance on calligraphy, viewing it as a profound cultural and spiritual practice transcending mere communication.

Both countries have strengthened translations. Bayt El-Hekma, an organization specializing in translation from Chinese to Arabic, has already translated “The Art of War,” “Three Kingdoms” and others. The organization noted an increase in Saudi interest in Chinese culture and civilization. Similarly, several Saudi works have been translated into Chinese.

Tourism is also emerging as an important component of cultural exchanges, especially from the Saudi side. Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, an ambitious plan conceived by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salma to diversify the country’s economy, identified tourism as the top industry after oil and energy. Riyadh aimed to increase tourism’s contribution to GDP from 3.5 percent in 2019 to 10 percent by 2030, targeting \$46 billion in revenue.

As a result of the kingdom’s extraordinary measures for the promotion of the sector, it surpassed the initial target of attracting 100 million visitors annually in 2023, seven years ahead of schedule. It set a new target to attract 150 million tourists annually by 2030.

China is the largest source of tourism globally. Before the pandemic in 2019, Chinese travelers made 155 million outbound trips and spent over \$250 billion while vacationing abroad. In light of this, Saudi Arabia will not want to ignore the world’s largest source of tourism to achieve its goals.

In 2023, Saudi Arabia attracted 150,000 Chinese tourists. The kingdom aims to attract 5 million Chinese tourists annually by 2030, making China the third-largest source of tourists. While speaking at the World Travel & Tourism Council Summit 2024 in October, the Saudi Deputy Minister of Tourism for International Affairs, Sultan Al Musallam, pinpointed China as a key target market for future tourism. Saudi Arabia has already implemented several China-specific measures. It streamlined the visa process, reduced fees, improved air connectivity and ensured destination readiness by providing information in Mandarin, signage at airports, Mandarin-speaking tour guides and hotel staff and acceptance of Chinese payment processing companies.

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These measures, along with the kingdom's reforms to abolish social taboos and open up the country, will help attract tourists. China also granted Saudi Arabia "approved destination status," allowing Chinese citizens to travel to Saudi Arabia on group tours.

It is said that seeing is believing. In-person interactions between the Chinese and Saudis would break stereotypes and foster deeper connections between people.

Saudi Arabia was the last GCC member to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1990. The strong influence of the United States over the kingdom throughout its modern history, along with the late start of Sino-Saudi diplomatic relations, limited cultural exchanges and people-to-people interactions for a long period of time. The absence of direct flights between the two countries as late as August 2023 reflected this limited interaction. However, this is changing rapidly. While Saudi Arabia is expanding its global reach, few culturally diverse countries have received as much attention as China.

Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of three important religions, has a rich history. China is the only surviving civilization dating back 5,000 years. Both China and Saudi Arabia have strong traditions in arts and crafts, ancient trade relations through the Silk Road, and a belief in the essential role that culture plays in developing relationships. The trajectory of their cultural cooperation and people-to-people exchanges over the past year indicates a promising future. A deeper understanding of these areas will also support their ever-expanding, multifaceted relationship, which is arguably an important development on the international stage.

The article was first published at China-US Focus, Hong Kong, October.18, 2024, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/china-saudi-cultural-ties-enter-a-new-era>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/247.html>)

RCAS Commentary

Security Clouds over China-Pakistan Relations Threaten Belt and Road

Ghulam Ali, Oct. 27, 2024

Chinese Premier Li Qiang was in Pakistan from 14 to 17 October for a bilateral visit and to attend the 23rd Meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This was the first visit by a Chinese premier to Pakistan in 11 years.



▲ Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif react after unveiling a plaque to mark the completion of the New Gwadar International Airport, during a ceremony at the Prime Minister's House in Islamabad, Pakistan, on 14 October 2024. (Prime Minister's House/Handout via Reuters)

Previous significant visits from China were by Premier Li Keqiang in May 2013, when the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was proposed, and by President Xi Jinping in April 2015, when the CPEC was formally inaugurated. Over the years, Pakistani leaders have made numerous lavish yet substantively lacking visits to China.

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China-Pakistan relations in the past decade have largely centred on CPEC, a multi-billion dollar project aiming to connect China's western region with Pakistan's Gwadar port in the southwestern province of Balochistan. Due to its perceived geostrategic and geoeconomic significance, CPEC was hyped as a “game-changer”, with Pakistan's Gwadar port emulating Shenzhen or Singapore.

However, this soon proved to be an illusion due to Pakistan's chronic security challenges and political instability. Even as analysts started pointing out the cooling of relations as China downgraded its relationship with Pakistan from “high priority” to “priority”, the outcome of Li's recent visit confirms this perception.

Security risks straining China-Pakistan ties?

The Pakistani military, which calls the shots in national affairs and is responsible for the security of CPEC, has failed in its duty. Anticipating security challenges as CPEC was being rolled out, Pakistan established a Special Security Division (SSD) in 2017, composed of over 15,000 armed personnel, including 9,000 from the army and 6,000 from paramilitary forces. This cost billions in local currency.

As attacks on the Chinese continued, most recently in October 2024, the Pakistani government approved an additional Rs 45 billion for the military to strengthen its capacity to protect Chinese commercial interests. The escalating security costs proportionally increase project expenses, adding to Pakistan's debt. The SSD is led by a sitting two-star general, with Major General Muhammad Abbas as its current head.

Despite these measures, persistent attacks have continued to test China's patience, which is wearing thin. In August 2024, the Pakistani military invited a Chinese military delegation led by General Li Qiaoming, the commander of the People's Liberation Army Ground Force. While the delegation was interacting with Pakistani military officials, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a separatist militant group fighting for the independence of Balochistan, launched its most coordinated attacks to date, shaking the province.

A turning point?

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On 6 October, merely a week before Premier Li's visit, the BLA again succeeded in a suicide attack on a Chinese convoy, resulting in the deaths of two Chinese nationals. The incident took place near Karachi airport, which is apparently a highly secured area.

The security situation during Premier Li's visit was so fragile that Chinese nationals in Pakistan were barred from travelling to sensitive areas. Pakistani authorities enforced a blanket lockdown on the capital, Islamabad, and the adjacent garrison city, Rawalpindi, with three public holidays declared during the SCO conference.

As a result of the precarious security situation, Premier Li "virtually" inaugurated the Gwadar airport, built with China's assistance. The inauguration of the airport was postponed due to security concerns.

From 2017, the year SSD was established, estimates are that at least 21 Chinese nationals have lost their lives in Pakistan. Considering the pattern, terrorist attacks are expanding in scale and scope, spreading beyond Gwadar and Balochistan.

According to former senator Mushahid Hussain, who is close to both the Pakistani military and China, and heads the Islamabad-based Pakistan-China Institute, the 6 October attack near Karachi airport was a severe blow and could be a "turning point" for the strategic partnership between the two countries.

Impact on economic cooperation

During Li's visit, the two sides signed 13 documents and issued a 30-point joint statement that rehashed most of the issues addressed in earlier statements. Pakistan reiterated its support for China on Taiwan, Hong Kong and the South China Sea.

China stated that "the Jammu and Kashmir dispute is left over from history and should be properly and peacefully resolved in accordance with the UN Charter, relevant UN Security Council resolutions, and bilateral agreements". While the Chinese stance supports Pakistan's position, there was no call for the abrogation of Article 370, which India introduced in August 2019 to revoke the Kashmir Valley's special status. This is Pakistan's primary demand for negotiations with India.

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The Main Line-1 (ML-1), Pakistan's railway connecting Peshawar to Karachi and passing through Lahore, Multan, Sukkur and Hyderabad, spans approximately 1,726 kilometres. An upgrade of ML-1 is the most expansive single project under CPEC, costing between US\$6.7 billion.

Discussions on the upgrade of ML-1 began during the first phase of CPEC. While it is a vital link for connectivity from the Chinese border to Pakistan's ports, China has become increasingly reluctant to finance it as the security situation deteriorates. The joint statement remained ambiguous about financing, stating that the two sides will work to "formulate financing and implementation plans that are feasible and sustainable at the earliest".

In addition, while the "Chinese side reiterated its support for Chinese companies to invest in Pakistan's Special Economic Zones [that should be] in line with the market and commercial principles", no new financial commitment was reported during the visit. It appears that in August 2024, China's rollover of billions of dollars in debt (along with the UAE and Saudi Arabia), which facilitated the IMF's US\$7 billion Extended Fund Facility for Pakistan, was its final economic relief.

Retention of downgraded status

The joint statement hoped that "any attempt to disrupt or undermine Pakistan-China cooperation is bound to fail", but did not show any resolve to counter such attempts. In fact, the joint statement's retention of the downgraded status of diplomatic relations with Pakistan as a "priority" explains it all.

Li is China's second most powerful leader after Xi Jinping. During his visit, the lack of notable advancements in the relationship, new investments and explicit commitments to the second phase of the CPEC indicates a slowdown in the relationship. The future progress of CPEC, and for that matter, bilateral relations, largely depends on the security situation, political stability and financial viability of Pakistan.

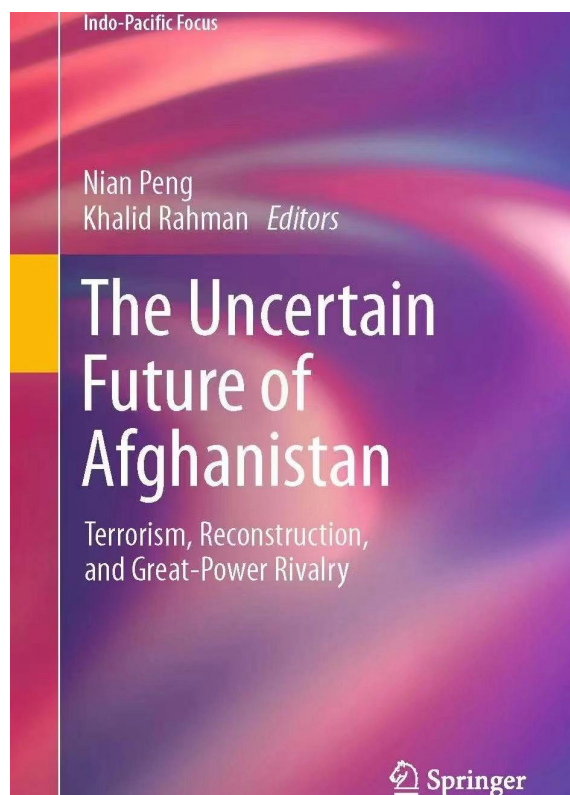
*The article was first published at Think China, Singapore, October.22, 2024,
[\(https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/security-clouds-over-china-pakistan-relations-threaten-belt-and-road?ref=top-hero\)](https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/security-clouds-over-china-pakistan-relations-threaten-belt-and-road?ref=top-hero).(<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/248.html>)*

RCAS Commentary

Book Review: Afghanistan's Rocky Road Ahead: What needs to be done?

Pervaiz Ali Mahesar, Oct. 27, 2024

Afghanistan, a landlocked country, has been steering tumultuous geopolitical upheavals for decades. Anarchy, chaos, and uncertainty have loomed large in Afghanistan. Since the horrific terrorist attacks in America, Kabul has become a focal point for the western world. Indeed, this book '*The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan-Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry*', under review is not the first to explore Afghanistan; numerous other books and articles have provided readers with insights from various perspectives. This book is an addition to the already existing literature on Afghanistan and brings together Chinese and Pakistani experts. In the following sections, I review briefly the impressions of various Pakistani and Chinese scholars given in different chapters.



▲ The title page of RCAS new book of Afghanistan.

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This book focuses on how Afghanistan's future has remained uncertain and what has been the position and role of the Afghan Taliban, America, China, India, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran.

In the introduction, the writer shifts blame for Afghanistan's uncertainty to foreign intervention and divisions within Taliban ranks. Furthermore, he explains that external factors, such as China-US geopolitical contestation and India as a key stakeholder, increased their role with America's exit from Afghan land. America adopted a carrot-and-stick policy for the Taliban by engaging and putting economic sanctions on Afghanistan. In this geopolitical tumult, New Delhi intensified its efforts to rekindle its relations with the Taliban and evade entanglement with Pakistan and China. At the domestic level, Afghanistan saw an increase and renewal of terrorism (Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K)) and civilian protests after American withdrawal, which multiplied challenges for the Afghan government.

The writer offers a succinct explanation in chapter two and suggests how to conduct peace negotiations and also identifies the reasons behind their failure to restore peace and stability in the region. The efforts for negotiating peace were conducted at various times, including in 2005, 2011, 2015, and 2016. Despite putting a lot of time and energy into turning the tide of evolving challenges, these peace negotiations failed to deliver. The writer identifies the causes of its failure: first, the ideological divide; second, the presence of foreign forces; third, a multiplicity of actors; fourth, a trust deficit; and fifth, spoilers (page 12). Further, the writer clarifies the difference between peace negotiations and peace agreements. The author asserts: "When peace negotiations fail, no peace agreement emerges, leading to war (or civil war)." Further, it is clarified that "lack of trust, timing, improper communication, domestic violence, military stalemate, hope for victory, and ambitious leaders" (p. 14) contribute to the failure of peace efforts.

Interestingly, the writer examines a few significant challenges in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. With the establishment of Taliban offices in Doha in 2013, the era of US-Taliban rapprochement began in February 2020. The Afghani youth bulge has doubled in two decades, from 19.68 to 40 million. The author cautions that failure to tackle these challenges could potentially undermine Afghanistan's peace and stability. Although the Afghan Taliban was partially successful in bringing peace and stability to some parts of Afghanistan, while

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challenges were enormous, for instance: lack of domestic cohesion, constitutional framework, geopolitical, economic, human rights, and migration. In addition to this, the threat of terrorist groups also existed. Indeed, terrorist groups such as the ISKP, Al-Qaeda, Dawesh, TTP, ETIM, and IMU posed a significant threat to Afghanistan. After all, the 20 years of radical insurgency against the US-led alliance in Afghanistan were not easy; it not only affected the Taliban's outlook and way of thinking, but also brought them into the global media spotlight following their participation in the Doha peace process from 2013 to 2021. The writer identifies two important challenges faced by the Afghan interim government: first, the Taliban governance style was not acceptable to an international community. Secondly, America imposed sanctions on Afghanistan. Despite these challenges, Afghanistan also managed economic interaction with the regional countries. The most important among these trans-Afghan connectivity projects were: TAPI, CASA, IPI, BRI, and CPEC. The growing influence of China in the Central Asian region, which includes states such as Pakistan and Iran, has expanded the reach and significance of Afghanistan in the region. The writer suggests that Beijing should play an active role and enhance cooperation and coordination in the region among different stakeholders. The Shanghai Cooperation is also one of the leading examples for enhancing strategic cooperation and connectivity in the region through BRI trade and investment. (p.58)

The writer crisply explains Taliban rule in Afghanistan, as well as security threats and regional response. In this chapter, Yu Hong Fu delves into the idea that the return of the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan could potentially create cross-regional linkages. Understanding the significance of the situation and China's increasing interest in the region, the writer illustrates China's active role in fostering a "Community of Shared Future." China has demonstrated its role, activism, and pragmatism in bringing Afghanistan into the regional framework with a focus on economic cooperation and regional integration. The Chinese writer also notes that political instability and security pose challenges. These factors have significantly impacted Chinese trust and confidence. However, economic investment requires peace and political stability at the domestic level. With caution and care, the writer concludes that stakeholders in the region have a long-term interest in Afghanistan. Hence, these states need to have a collective, cohesive, and long-term approach towards Afghanistan.

It argues how America pursued its policy after 9/11 and how it failed to bring about change and prosperity in Afghanistan. After the world witnessed the horrific attack on the New York twin towers on September 11, 2001, Washington made a decision to launch an attack on Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. After spending trillions of dollars and engaging in more than sixteen years of conflict in Afghanistan, the United States was forced to withdraw quickly from the war-torn region, leaving many unanswered questions. The writer identifies hidden motives of Washington in Afghanistan, such as increasing its influence, watching Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and encircling China. Furthermore, the writer succinctly states: “Despite lavish expenditures and the loss of innocent civilians, the US has terribly failed to achieve its overt or covert goals, thereby destroying peace and stability in the region.” America failed due to its lack of understanding of Afghan culture, tribal politics, and the underestimated power of Al-Qaeda. Meanwhile, “due to their negligence and confusion, the Taliban received ample time to reorganize and reemerge” (p: 83). Although America had also developed an Afghan National Army, they faced resistance and a trust deficit. Hence, there was less progress on this front.

The writer delves into the launch of the Chinese project, the Belt and Road Initiative, and its engagement with Afghanistan in chapter six. Has this project made any progress, and what are the challenges it faces? The writer identifies five areas in which more focus is required: infrastructure development, political stability, and addressing security challenges. Furthermore, the writer suggests the need for coordination in formulating a relevant policy, creating a free moment for trade along the border, providing aid, ensuring the connectivity of various projects, and enhancing people-to-people exchanges. Afghanistan can benefit from the Chinese projects only when there is political stability, internal cohesion, policy coordination, and peaceful relations with its neighbors.

Further, the writer looks at the Russian engagement in Afghanistan and explores its future. Russia had invaded Afghanistan before 1990 and had a significant influence in the region. America, realizing the threat from growing communism, tried to contain Russian ideology. Russia is deeply involved in Afghanistan, both individually and through collaboration with India. In chapter eight, the author scrutinizes the relationship between India and Afghanistan and concentrates on the resurgence of the Taliban. Analysts often highlight India’s policies and its

geostrategic interaction with the Afghan Taliban. In particular, New Delhi began to feel threatened after the resurgence of the Taliban in the 1990s. While making sense of the security challenge, India saw a growing wave of militants and insurgents in Kashmir. But after the United States exited Afghanistan, India showed interest and adopted a “soft power approach” in terms of socio-economic engagement in Afghanistan. Pakistan-India relations have seen less rapprochement. It’s interesting to observe that the amount of unofficial and illegal trade surpasses that of official trade. Despite repeated efforts to move towards friendly relations, the India-America nexus has consistently made the situation more vulnerable, risky, and uncertain. In fact, apart from traditional and non-traditional security threats to India-Pakistan relations, the Taliban or Afghan factor has loomed large in their relations.

In conclusion, the editor highlights the role of New Delhi in Afghanistan and explains how the former has felt threatened by Taliban-Pakistan nexuses. Indeed, India has made significant investments in Afghanistan’s infrastructure development, but China-Pakistan factors have complicated these socio-economic interactions. While sensing the re-emergence and regrouping of the Afghan Taliban, India began to de-limit its engagement and, at the same time, opened the doors for humanitarian assistance. The editor concludes that India needs to adapt to the emerging challenges in Afghanistan.

In fact, this edited book offers ideas and perspectives on Afghanistan and its uncertain future. The book traces Afghanistan’s history and succinctly identifies factors shaping Afghan uncertainty. It also examines the role of stakeholders like Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and India. In addition to this, it discusses the Afghan situation before and after the attacks on twin towers in New York, as well as the great power rivalry between China, India, Russia, and America in Afghanistan. Finally, it elaborates on challenges faced by Taliban-India relations. However, this edited book does not focus on the great power rivalry over Afghanistan and its future prospects. Rather, it focuses more on India, Pakistan, Russia, and China in Afghanistan. We found some of the chapters to be repetitions of the previous ones. In fact, this edition adds to the literature on Pakistan-Afghan relations, strategic relations, and great power politics. It is worth reading for students of International Relations, International Politics, Political Science, Defense, and Strategic Studies.

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<https://sindhcourier.com/book-review-afghanistans-rocky-road-ahead-what-needs-to-be-done/>.(<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/250.html>)*

RCAS Commentary

BRICS Paves Way for China, India Reengagement

Ghulam Ali, Nov. 10, 2024

The 16th BRICS summit, held in the Russian city of Kazan from October 22 to 24, had many takeaways. Delegates gathered from 36 countries, joining the UN secretary-general. The final joint communique proposed fair trade in local currencies. It also renounced the practice of unilateral sanctions.



▲ Attending the meeting on the Russian side were Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office, Special Presidential Representative for Financial and Economic Cooperation with BRICS States and Interaction with the New Development Bank Maxim Oreshkin, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office-Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov, Presidential Aide Yury Ushakov, Head of the Republic of Tatarstan Rustam Minnikhanov, Deputy Foreign Minister, Russia's BRICS Sherpa Sergei Ryabkov, and Ambassador at Large of Russia's Foreign Ministry, Russia's BRICS Sous-Sherpa Pavel Knyazev.

Russia pushed for the creation of a new payment system that would offer an alternative to the U.S. dollar while enhancing financial cooperation among BRICS member countries. The statement raised concerns over the disruptive effects of unlawful unilateral coercive measures, including illegal sanctions. The organization made its largest expansion by admitting four new permanent members-Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

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In another significant outcome, BRICS provided a platform for China and India to reconcile their relations, which have been strained since 2020. On Oct 21, Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri briefed the media on a deal between India and China to end their military standoff and start joint patrols of their disputed border. The next day, Lin Jian, the spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, confirmed this.

The deal paved the way for a meeting between India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and China's President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the summit. Although the two leaders had exchanged pleasantries during the G20 summit in Bali in November 2022 and at the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August last year, their last summit-level talk was in October 2019 in the southern Indian town of Mamallapuram. The Kazan meeting marked their first delegate-level talk in the past five years.

During the meeting, Xi remarked that China and India were at a crucial stage of development and "should carefully handle differences and disagreements and facilitate each other's pursuit of development aspirations." He added that, being the most populous developing countries, they had a responsibility to promote multipolarity in international relations.

Modi said that "mutual trust, mutual respect and mutual sensitivity will guide bilateral relations." In a post on his X account, Modi said that India-China relations were "important for the people of our countries and for regional and global peace and stability."

Both leaders underlined the need for enhanced strategic commitment and predictable and amicable bilateral relations. They endorsed the cooperation deal and said their special representatives and relevant bodies would meet soon. The language used by the leaders and officials on both sides reflected maturity and avoided jingoism and point-scoring.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval serve as special representatives for China and India, respectively. They have met at various international gatherings in recent years but have not held a meeting in their capacity as SRs since 2019. They will meet soon to push negotiations forward. The Xi-Modi meeting in Kazan has put China-India relations back on track.

From the 1980s until the mid-2010s, the China-India relationship has seen significant improvement. The two sides demilitarized the world's longest border and developed a unique mechanism for unarmed patrolling to avoid escalation. As a result, for more than four decades, no casualties have been incurred on the disputed boundary. This tranquility began to change in the mid-2010s. In 2017, the Doklam region (under China's control but contested by Bhutan) became a hot spot. The Indian military crossed the China-Bhutan border to prevent the Chinese military from building a road. This infuriated China and led to a 70-day standoff as China said India had violated its territory. Following that, the China-India relationship entered a hostile spiral of escalation, culminating in the Galwan showdown in June 2020, where 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese soldiers reportedly lost their lives. These were the first casualties since 1975.

In reaction to the Galwan Valley clashes, India implemented several measures against China, including banning hundreds of Chinese mobile applications, suspending direct flights between the two countries, delaying visa issuance for Chinese nationals and restricting Chinese investments in strategic sectors. At a strategic level, India expanded its ties with China's rivals, including the United States, Japan and Australia. New Delhi revived the Quad-a grouping of India, the U.S., Japan and Australia-and strengthened its military relations with America. While these measures were welcomed by hawks, they raised concerns in India's business community.

Fast forward. Several factors contributed to the shift from hostile relations to the Xi-Modi meeting. To begin with, BRICS provided India with a platform to engage with China diplomatically without appearing overly eager to restore pre-2020 conditions, since it was primarily India that hastily severed many communication channels. India's business community played a crucial role in encouraging the government to move back toward engagement.

China's importance to India is evident in the fact that two-way trade expanded despite tense relations. For example, bilateral trade rose from \$71.66 billion in 2015 to \$118.4 billion in the 2023-24 period, making China India's largest trading partner- surpassing even the United States.

India's Economic Survey in 2024 pointedly sought integration into Chinese supply chains and FDI to boost exports to the U.S. and other countries, similar to what other East Asian economies had done in the past. The survey added: "It is more effective to have Chinese companies invest in

India and then export the products to these markets rather than importing from China, adding minimal value.”

Some Chinese commentaries, both before and after the Xi-Modi meeting, called India’s post-2020 measures a “mistake.” They saw India’s policy to decouple from China in order to attract significant U.S. assistance as unsuccessful. In their view, the U.S.-led West did little to support the “Made in India” initiative and the country’s modernization and industrialization. The upcoming U.S. elections have added to the uncertainties about future U.S. policies.

Another immediate reason for India’s conciliatory tone is the growing diplomatic tension with Canada, with which New Delhi had significant trade. Following Ottawa’s charges that Indian diplomats had been involved in the assassination of Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar, there was a tit-for-tat expulsion of diplomats. Against this backdrop, a deal with China would relieve pressure along India’s longest border.

From a long-term perspective, normalization with China would support India’s aspiration for a permanent seat whenever the UNSC is reformed. India has the backing of other Western powers for its bid. As the issue of UN reforms gains traction, New Delhi needs to cultivate amicable relations with China.

From the Chinese side, economic and strategic considerations drove it toward reconciliation with India. China’s economy has faced serious challenges in recent years, particularly in the real estate sector. Additionally, China is contending with U.S. and Western sanctions and tariffs in various areas. From a strategic perspective, restoring relations with India to their pre-2020 status would prevent New Delhi from drifting closer to the U.S. The China-India deal endorsed by Xi and Modi has put the bilateral relationship back on track. This comes as a relief for both countries, which face trouble on multiple fronts.

China and India are the founding and largest members of BRICS. An improvement in bilateral relations will empower the organization, strengthen South-South cooperation and promote multipolarity. It will also enhance the status of BRICS as a platform to address sensitive issues through diplomacy, with Russia playing the role of facilitator as the summit host.

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<https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/brics-paves-way-for-china-india-reengagement>.(<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/252.html>)*

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RCAS Commentary

Connectivity Overdrive: How Hard and Soft Links Boost

China-ASEAN Cooperation

Nian Peng, Nov. 18, 2024

ASEAN leaders recently went to China one after the other. On 8 November, Indonesia's new president, Prabowo Subianto, visited China on one of his first overseas visits as president. From 4 to 7 November, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim visited China, his third since taking office. In addition, leaders of the Mekong countries-Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam-attended the 8th Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) summit held from 4 to 7 November in Kunming, Yunnan.



▲ The high-speed rail (HSR) project connecting Indonesia's two major cities Jakarta and Bandung, a joint venture between Indonesian and Chinese state-owned companies. (KCIC)

These recent high-level interactions not only reflect closer China-ASEAN relations since the pandemic, but also underscore the urgent need for regional cooperation among ASEAN countries.

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The need for closer economic cooperation

During his talks with Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang, Anwar pledged that Malaysia, as the rotating chair of ASEAN next year, would strive to strengthen regional cooperation. Li replied that China would be willing to work with Malaysia to promote regional economic integration.

It is clear that accelerating regional cooperation and promoting economic integration are goals that enjoy strong consensus between China and ASEAN countries.

Similarly, the just-concluded GMS leaders' meeting stressed the need to promote sustainable development and economic integration in the region. In introducing Prabowo's visit to China, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that China stands ready to work with Indonesia to boost regional and global development and prosperity.

In the Mekong Region, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) initiated by China has achieved impressive efforts in deepening regional connectivity, creating the Lancang-Mekong Economic Development Belt (LMEDB), building the Lancang-Mekong sub-regional community with a shared future, as well as supporting the ASEAN Community building and regional integration process.

China boosting connectivity with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam

The China-Laos railway, which is the first cross-border railway between China and the Mekong region, has in the first ten months of the year, carried over 16 million passengers and transported over 16 million tons of goods. In July, the Thai-Laos railway officially began its trial operation. As the first phase construction of the Thai-China railway is also being accelerated under the Paetongtarn administration, the China-Laos-Thai railway will function in the future.

Additionally, the construction of the China-Vietnam railway is expected to commence in 2025, and the preliminary work for the China-Cambodia railway is being expedited.

It is worth noting that the stagnant China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) since Myanmar's military coup in 2021 has gained new momentum to be revived. During the meeting between Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang and Chairman of the Myanmar State Administration Council (SAC) Min Aung Hlaing on 7 November, Li expressed China's willingness to work with

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Myanmar to “steadily advance the construction of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor under the framework of high-quality Belt and Road cooperation”.

Min Aung Hlaing outlined Myanmar’s ongoing strategies for the economic corridor under CMEC, including the Muse-Mandalay-Kyaukpyu railway road project. This project, a key component of the previously cancelled China-Myanmar cross-border railway, will commence development in feasible areas. So, it can be said that the China-Myanmar cross-border railway will be resumed, thus providing a solid foundation for CMEC.

Infrastructure in maritime Southeast Asia

In maritime Southeast Asia, physical connectivity has also been greatly promoted with Chinese technology. The East Coast Rail project in Malaysia is proceeding smoothly, with 72.93% of the total work completed by September. Flagship projects such as the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) and the China-Malaysia Qinzhou Industrial Park under the model of “Two Countries, Twin Parks”, are being steadily advanced.

The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway in Indonesia, which was officially inaugurated over a year ago, has transported over 5.79 million passengers. Both China and Indonesia speak highly of the important contributions of the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Railway to local economic and social development and pledged to jointly ensure its high-quality operation during Prabowo’s China tour. Both sides will also work together to promote the Regional Comprehensive Economic Corridor and “Two Countries, Twin Parks”.

On 11 November, 25 memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and agreements were announced during the bilateral meeting between Chinese Vice-Premier Ding Xuexiang and Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong, in which physical connectivity topped the list. These mainly include the projects under the China-Singapore (Chongqing) Demonstration Initiative on Strategic Connectivity and the Singapore-Shandong Green and Digital Shipping Corridor (GDSC).

Paying attention to ‘soft connectivity’

While the “hard connectivity” of infrastructure is being strengthened, China is also increasingly paying attention to the construction of the “soft connectivity” of standards and rules.

Last month, Chinese and ASEAN leaders jointly announced the substantial conclusion of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) 3.0 Upgrade negotiations. Against the backdrop of high concerns over rising anti-multilateralism and trade protectionism arising after Donald Trump regains power in the US, the FTA provides an institutional assurance for China and ASEAN to jointly build a super-large common market.

This would not only further deepen the trade and investment cooperation between China and ASEAN and thus the delivery of greater benefits from infrastructure connectivity, but also bolster the willingness and confidence of both sides to advance regional cooperation and reduce the interference caused by the resurgence of US trade protectionism.

Next, it is necessary for China and ASEAN to continue their efforts in the fields of industrial cooperation and people-to-people exchanges to strengthen the economic integration through industrial chain reconstruction and shape a consensus of regional cooperation through convenient personnel exchanges.

Looking to the future

Last month, at the 27th China-ASEAN Summit, China expressed its intention to expand cooperation in emerging industries with ASEAN to add momentum to Asian development in the future. This month, at the GMS Summit, China stressed the importance of innovation-driven development with Mekong River countries to foster new growth drivers for the region.

In the future, China and ASEAN can develop cross-border industrial chains in emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, digital economy, green development and new energy vehicles, and scale up regional emerging industries to maximise the benefits brought by regional cooperation.

Currently, China has implemented a convenient visa-free entry policy with Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and other ASEAN countries. At the GMS summit, China announced the “Lancang-Mekong visas” granting five-year multiple-entry visas to qualified business people from the Mekong states. This not only provides greater convenience for personnel exchanges between

China and ASEAN countries, but also heightens the strong civilian support for regional cooperation.

To conclude, with the synergistic effects of “hard connectivity” and “soft connectivity” working together, China-ASEAN regional cooperation will yield even greater gains in the future.

This article was first published at Think China, Singapore, November 18, 2024, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/connectivity-overdrive-how-hard-and-soft-links-boost-china-asean-cooperation?ref=home-latest-articles>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/255.html>)

RCAS Commentary

Security Concerns Impede China-Pakistan Relations

Ghulam Ali, Nov. 22, 2024

Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Jiang Zaidong recently criticized the repeated attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan, calling them “unacceptable” and citing security as the biggest challenge to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). His comments followed two fatal incidents within six months, which claimed seven Chinese lives. Pakistan’s Foreign Office, instead of addressing the concerns, dismissed the remarks as “perplexing,” revealing underlying tensions in the bilateral relationship. Despite China’s role as Pakistan’s key economic partner, security lapses and strained diplomacy are testing the limits of their traditionally strong ties, highlighting deeper challenges to the CPEC and broader cooperation. These tensions point to a more complex dynamic in bilateral relations, revealing that mutual dependency alone may not be sufficient to sustain smooth cooperation amidst mounting challenges.



▲ The Inauguration of China-Pakistan Joint Exercise Warrior-VIII on November 20, 2024.(China Military)

BACKGROUND

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The diplomatic row between China and Pakistan intensified during a seminar in Islamabad on October 30, when Chinese Ambassador Jiang Zaidong openly rebutted remarks by Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar. Dar claimed that China prioritized security in its overseas investments but made Pakistan an exception due to its friendship. The ambassador firmly countered, stating that President Xi Jinping consistently emphasizes the importance of ensuring the safety of Chinese personnel, institutions, and projects in Pakistan, reiterating that security remains China's top concern and a major constraint to the CPEC.

This marked the first public expression of such sentiments by China and an equally unprecedented response from Pakistan's Foreign Office, which described the remarks as “perplexing” and “surprising.” Pakistan's English-language media reflected the gravity of the situation, with Dawn describing the exchange as rare and The Nation advising restraint from the Foreign Office. Further complicating matters, Pakistan canceled President Asif Ali Zardari's planned visit to China on November 2, citing a dubious pretext of a foot injury, signaling deeper strains in the relationship amid growing concerns over security and diplomatic discord.

This is not the first time China has urged Pakistan to ensure the security of its nationals. In several meetings with Pakistani leaders, China has consistently emphasized the importance of safeguarding Chinese citizens and interests in Pakistan. During his meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif in June 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated the need for Pakistan to create a safe and stable environment, stressing the protection of Chinese nationals, projects, and institutions. In line with this, Beijing also sent Liu Jianchao, Minister of the International Department of the CPC Central Committee, to Islamabad, where he echoed similar concerns regarding security during discussions with Pakistan's political leaders. China has faced numerous attacks on its citizens in Pakistan, with over 21 Chinese nationals killed since 2017.

The Balochistan Liberation Army, a separatist group seeking independence for the underdeveloped Balochistan province, which hosts the strategic Gwadar Port, is behind many of these attacks. The Balochi population has long expressed grievances over marginalization and resource extraction without benefiting from the region's wealth, fueling insurgent movements. Currently, Balochistan is experiencing its fifth wave of insurgency.

Another key source of attacks on Chinese nationals is the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant group primarily based in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. While the TTP has denied responsibility, Pakistani authorities have attributed the March 2024 suicide bombing that killed five Chinese engineers to the group. Allegations suggest that the TTP may be collaborating with Uyghur separatists, given their shared religious ideology, further complicating the security landscape for Chinese nationals in Pakistan.

IMPLICATIONS

The Chinese ambassador's public expression of frustration and his direct reprimand of Pakistani officials highlighted China's increasing impatience with Pakistan's handling of security for Chinese nationals. By emphasizing the gravity of the situation and warning against future incidents, the ambassador signaled that China would no longer shy away from bluntly addressing its concerns.

This shift in tone underscores the growing tension in the bilateral relationship, with the potential for global attention if the situation deteriorates further. The security situation in Pakistan will be pivotal in determining China's future investment decisions. If the security environment remains unstable, China may choose to complete ongoing projects but refrain from launching new ones. This was evident during Chinese Premier Li Qiang's mid-October visit to Pakistan for the SCO conference, where he did not explicitly endorse the second phase of the CPEC or any new initiatives. This lack of commitment signals that security concerns could heavily influence China's willingness to deepen its involvement in Pakistan moving forward.

China and Pakistan had already planned to review their counterterrorism cooperation, and recent developments are likely to expedite this process through three key trends. First, China may increase its security support by providing bomb-proof vehicles for the safe transport of Chinese engineers, offering specialized security training to Pakistani personnel, and expanding intelligence sharing and consultation between the two countries.

Second, the idea of involving Chinese private security companies (PSCs) or establishing joint security arrangements with Pakistani counterparts could gain traction. China has expressed interest in deploying PSCs, especially in conflict zones worldwide, to safeguard its growing

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investments. However, the deployment of PSCs to Pakistan faces both legal and practical obstacles. Pakistani law prohibits foreign security companies from operating within its borders. Even if this hurdle is overcome, the concept is likely to face challenges due to the country's security realities. The Pakistani military and intelligence agencies, despite having the necessary resources and capabilities, have struggled to protect Chinese nationals. Given this, private companies, with far fewer resources, may not be effective in improving security.

Additionally, bringing in foreign security personnel, whether from China's armed forces or private firms, could expose them to the same risks from terrorist groups that have targeted Chinese nationals in the past.

Third, the worsening security situation in Pakistan could provide the military with a pretext for launching another large-scale military operation, something it has long advocated. In June 2024, the Pakistani government approved the counter-terrorism operation Azm-e-Istehkam (Resolve for Stability), but its implementation was delayed due to opposition from political parties and the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), which advocates for the rights of Pashtuns. However, conducting a military operation during a period of economic difficulties, political polarization, and significant opposition would reduce its likelihood of success.

Additionally, such an operation would come with substantial economic costs and the risk of collateral damage, particularly in already unstable regions, further complicating its execution and effectiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

Although a seemingly minor incident, Chinese Ambassador Jiang Zaidong's remarks have exposed long-standing issues between China and Pakistan, revealing underlying challenges in their relationship. These comments have sparked debate, both within Pakistan and internationally, regarding the durability of their "all-weather" friendship. If one factor has most damaged the Sino-Pakistani partnership, it is terrorism. Likewise, if there is one issue that will significantly determine the future of this relationship, it is the ongoing challenge of terrorism and its impact on security for both nations.

*The article was first published at The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, November.20, 2024,
[https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13829-security-concerns-
impede-china-pakistan-relations.html](https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13829-security-concerns-impede-china-pakistan-relations.html).(<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/256.html>)*

RCAS Commentary

China Should Not Worry about Trump's Second Terms

Ghulam Ali, Nov. 23, 2024

With his victory in the Nov. 5 election, Donald Trump is set to become the 47th president of the United States in January. While his return to the White House after four years has created a sense of uncertainty worldwide, analysts discuss its consequences for China the most.



▲ Chinese President Xi Jinping (2nd R) and his wife Peng Liyuan (1st R), and U.S. President Donald Trump (2nd L) and his wife Melania Trump (1st L) pose for a photo in front of Taihedian, the Hall of Supreme Harmony, during their visit to the Palace Museum, or the Forbidden City, in Beijing, capital of China, Nov. 8, 2017. (Xinhua/Xie Huanchi)

Their concerns stem from Trump's China-centric measures during his first term in office (2017-21). Sino-U.S. relations began to face troubles early on, when Trump in December 2016 received a congratulatory call from Taiwan's leader Tsai Ing-wen. Since the establishment of Sino-U.S. diplomatic relations in 1979, Trump was the first president-elect to speak with a sitting top official of the island. Subsequently, his administration imposed tariffs on over \$360 billion of

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Chinese products and targeted Chinese tech firms, including Huawei, over security concerns. Trump issued at least eight executive orders specifically related to China.

During his 2024 election campaign for a second term, Trump threatened to impose a 60 percent tariff on imports from China, revoke China's most favored nation status and relocate pharmaceutical manufacturing from China, among other measures. These announcements, combined with his domineering personality and obsession with the theme "Make America great again," shaped most analysts' projections of a tense Sino-U.S. relationship during Trump's second term.

Is China really vulnerable to the anticipated U.S. trade war and heavy tariffs? Key areas where the U.S. under the Trump administration could challenge China include trade, tariffs and technology. However, in anticipation of such measures, Chinese leadership in recent years adopted strategies to diversify its economy, trade and investment with various regional and trade blocs while strengthening bilateral relations with middle powers and promising economies.

For example, China has consolidated its partnership with ASEAN and is one of the 17 dialogue partners of the ASEAN Regional Forum and a member of ASEAN Plus Three. Both sides have established the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area and are currently negotiating to upgrade and expand its provisions. The level of engagement is evident in the fact that in 2023, China-ASEAN trade volume reached an impressive \$911.7 billion, making China and ASEAN each other's largest trading partners for four consecutive years.

In January 2022, the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership came into effect. RCEP represents one of the largest free trade agreements in history, encompassing 15 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and the 10 ASEAN nations. The partnership covers approximately 2.2 billion people and accounts for about 30 percent of global GDP, making it a pivotal player in the global economy. Further, RCEP aims to eliminate tariffs on at least 90 percent of goods traded between member countries over 20 years. This is expected to facilitate smoother trade flows and enhance market access.

China has also deepened its cooperation with the Arab world, particularly with the six members of the oil- and gas-rich Gulf Cooperation Council. It has become the largest trading partner of

many Arab countries. Trade volume between China and Arab nations surged from a mere \$36.7 billion in 2004 to \$431.4 billion in 2022, a multiple of 11. A survey of recent developments shows a major shift in China's investments, manufacturing, trade and energy deals done with the wider Middle East region.

China is reaching out to far-flung areas. Beijing expanded economic ties with Latin America and the Caribbean. Between 2005 and 2020, it provided more than \$138 billion in loans to the LAC region. This economic boost to developing regional economies-and the potential political benefits for local leaders eager to showcase their efforts in addressing pressing development needs-has been significant. For many LAC countries, China is regarded as an indispensable partner. As a result, China's trade with LAC surged from \$12 billion in 2000 to \$445 billion in 2021.

The BRICS group, of which China is a founding member, is another platform for diversifying China's trade. During its 15th session in Kazan, Russia in October, member countries discussed increasing inter-bloc trade, de-dollarization, using grain as a medium of exchange and opposing unilateral sanctions (a reference to the United States). In a significant expansion, BRICS admitted four new members: Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. The total GDP of BRICS (including the expansion) is approximately \$30.8 trillion, representing about 29 percent of the world's GDP.

Beijing also expanded its bilateral relations with major middle powers and improved ties with individual members of ASEAN (with the exception of the Philippines). The recent visits of Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto are its manifestation. While in China, Prabowo said that Indonesia would maintain its non-aligned status and would not take sides in any geopolitical rivalry.

Similarly, the meeting between China's President Xi Jinping and India's Narendra Modi on the sidelines of BRICS, their first meeting in five years, led to a deescalation of the China-India military confrontation and eased tensions on the disputed border. This would logically expand their bilateral trade. In fact, Sino-Indian trade thrived despite the geopolitical rivalry.

Moreover, Chinese Premier Li Qiang's visit to Australia in June has put the Sino-Australian relationship on track. China's development of relations with two key Quad members and close U.S. allies (India and Australia) underscores the pull of China's economic power.

All this explains China's strategies for the diversification of its trade, economy, investment and energy policies in anticipation of global economic troubles. Therefore, even if the Trump administration imposes tariffs, China has a diverse set of reliable platforms to fall back on.

While anticipating the Trump administration's consequences for Sino-U.S. relations, it is equally important to highlight that most analysts focus primarily on confrontational areas and tend to overlook cooperative aspects. Goodwill and the recognition of the need for cooperation exist in parallel on both the Chinese and American sides. China's neutrality on U.S. elections, its respect for Americans' choices and Xi's congratulatory message to Trump convey its goodwill and commitment to constructive diplomacy.

Similarly, Trump and the U.S. are not solely negative about China. Trump has occasionally referred to Xi Jinping as a "very good friend." At the same time, it is uncertain whether Trump would wholeheartedly pursue his election promises or continue the confrontational policies of his first term. For politicians, election campaigns and governance are often different. Campaigns are lively rallies aimed at capturing voters' attention through a mix of optimistic, exaggerated and even reckless claims. Leaders face a reality check when they enter power corridors. There are various reality checks:

First, Trump knows that imposing tariffs and waging a trade war would lead to retaliation by "targeting Fortune 500 companies exposed to the Chinese market." China could also suppress the export of tech-critical minerals to offset American curbs on semiconductors.

Second, China holds what analysts call a "nuclear option" of selling off some of its \$775 billion in U.S. Treasury securities and allowing its currency to devalue against the dollar.

Third, Elon Musk, who manufactures Tesla electric cars in China and who supported Trump's election, would not want a trade war.

Fourth, Trump's earlier trade war, which resulted in a deal with China (signed in 2020), hardly helped reduce the trade deficit or increase Chinese investment in the U.S. These decisions are shaped by market forces.

Fifth, the U.S. tariffs imposed on the world's second-largest economy and largest manufacturer would not be limited to China alone. They would disrupt global supply chains, affecting both U.S. allies and adversaries.

Sixth, a study by scholars at the Peterson Institute for International Economics found that the upcoming Trump administration's plan to impose a 60 percent tariff on imports from China and up to 20 percent on goods from all other countries will ultimately be passed on to American consumers. This could cost U.S. households in the middle class more than \$2,600 a year. As this policy would also affect other countries, including U.S. allies, it would create a negative impact on U.S. foreign policy.

In September 2023, Tony Chan, president of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, and his colleagues denounced U.S. measures to slow China's technological development in an essay in *Foreign Policy*. They provided examples of how curbs on China have led to innovations. This is particularly relevant now. While Trump's China policy has yet to be revealed, but if he targets China he is likely to achieve little and instead push China toward further discoveries and innovations.

On the Taiwan issue, most of Beijing's concerns stem from the sensitivity of the matter. Trump did not cross China's red line. After his telephone conversation with Tsai in 2016, Trump adhered to the status quo policy for the rest of his presidency. This time around, he seems even more critical of Taiwan. He accused it of undermining the U.S. chip industry and insisted that it pay the U.S. for its defense—a much more transactional approach than one driven by geopolitics.

On many global issues, Trump would require China's support, just as he sought it during his first term—for example, for rapprochement with North Korea and Russia. During his election campaign, Trump promised to end the Russia-Ukraine war quickly and restore peace in the Middle East. For these and various other issues, Trump would need China's assistance.

Trump toughened his China policy around 2018 as the U.S. approached the 2020 elections. At that time, China had become a target for U.S. politicians. This second term would be his last. Thus, because he could no longer seek re-election, his policies might differ from those aimed at electoral politics. Trump might prefer to leave behind a legacy as a peacemaker, a friend and an ender of wars.

A change of leadership in the White House would certainly pose new challenges for Beijing, as it would for many other countries, but China is not as vulnerable as portrayed in most analyses. It would also bring opportunities, such as pushing China to diversify its investments and explore new markets on one hand, while projecting itself as a stable and predictable power on the other.

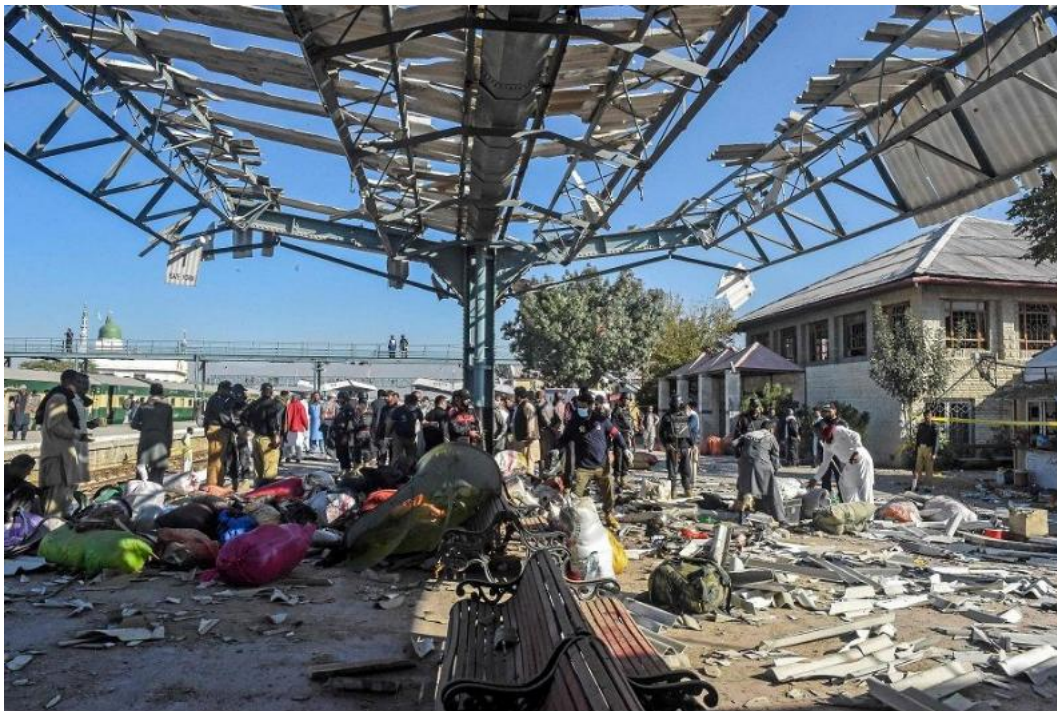
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RCAS Commentary

Protecting Chinese Workers in Pakistan: Should the PLA Intervene?

Ghulam Ali, Nov. 27, 2024

Unabated terrorist attacks on Chinese workers in Pakistan have prompted policy circles to discuss the prospects of China's direct involvement in ensuring the safety of its workers in the country. While both governments have remained tight-lipped, the media has uncovered information about ongoing discussions between the two nations.



▲ Passengers' belongings are seen scattered on the platform after an explosion at a railway station in Quetta, in Pakistan's Balochistan province, on 9 November 2024. (Banaras Khan/AFP)

If these reports prove valid, it would represent a major shift in China's traditional policy of avoiding security roles in other countries. Furthermore, initiating such a role in a terror-hit Pakistan would serve as a litmus test for Beijing's capabilities.

Decreasing Chinese investment

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Under its “flagship” China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China has committed nearly US\$62 billion for projects in Pakistan, of which US\$25 billion has already been spent. In developing this project, China has faced severe security challenges due to relentless terrorist attacks on its workers engaged in various projects in Pakistan.

In 2024 alone, seven Chinese nationals lost their lives in two separate attacks. The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a terrorist outfit fighting against the Pakistani military for the independence of Balochistan, and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a religious extremist group demanding the implementation of strict Islamic laws and operating along the porous Pakistan-Afghanistan border, carried out these attacks.

Such challenges have led China to reduce its investment in Pakistan by 74% in 2023, despite an increase in its post-pandemic investments worldwide. Chinese Premier Li Qiang made no commitments to new projects or to initiating the second phase of the CPEC during his maiden visit to Pakistan in October 2024.

China a soft target

Notably, both BLA and TTP, fighting against the Pakistani military, harbour no direct grudges against China. Moreover, these terrorist groups are a result of the flawed policies of the Pakistani state.

The pernicious seeds of religious extremism in Pakistan were sown by military dictator General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88), who imposed strict Islamic laws in the country and joined the Afghan jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s. Subsequent military leadership also used religious proxies expeditiously.

The TTP is an offshoot of those policies. Most of its demands-implementation of Islamic laws, withdrawal of the military from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, provincial autonomy and the release of prisoners-are directed at the military. None of these demands is related to China.

Similarly, the insurgency in Balochistan is largely a reaction to oppressive military policies, marginalisation, denial of a share in the province’s abundant natural resources, the establishment

of military cantonments and the enforced disappearances of thousands of local Balochis. The roots of this insurgency, now in its fifth wave, trace back to the independence of Pakistan.

China's role in Balochistan began in 2002 with the construction of Gwadar port. Even after the completion of the first phase of the port, China withdrew, and the port was handed over to the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA). The differences between the Pakistani government and PSA were resolved by transferring administrative control to China in 2015.

Both terrorist groups are fighting against the Pakistani state, specifically the military. China is merely caught in the crossfire. China's significance to Pakistan, due to its historically strong strategic relationship, makes it a soft target. Any attack on the Chinese in Pakistan would bring these groups into the international limelight, which they seek for attention.

China's security role in Pakistan: PSCs or the PLA?

To counter these attacks, proposals for China's direct role in Pakistan's security have emerged. These include the deployment of China's private security companies (PSCs) or the People's Liberation Army (PLA), strengthening the capabilities of Pakistani security agencies, and establishing a joint security management system with Chinese security officials participating in security meetings.

China's PSCs, although having grown to thousands with millions of employees, have limited experience in international operations. According to reports, at most 40 of them have overseas operations. Furthermore, PSCs do not carry firearms, lack high-risk operational capabilities and operate under limited authority. Their role primarily consists of intelligence gathering, escort services, security training, risk assessment, site protection and emergency evacuation.

The deployment of PSCs or the PLA would require amendments to the existing laws of both countries, as they prohibit security roles in other countries. While amendments may not be difficult, as both states are involved, the fundamental question is whether China's security role, through PSCs, the PLA, or other security operatives with a direct presence in Pakistan, will help ensure the safety of its citizens.

China should think twice

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If PSCs or the PLA are deployed in the outer security circles around Chinese compounds or alongside vehicles carrying Chinese engineers, it would directly expose them to terrorist targets. As terrorists employ suicide attacks, which are the ultimate form of ambush, this reduces the chances of survival. Chinese deployments would hardly enhance security, given that they are unfamiliar with Pakistani culture and geographic conditions.

At the same time, deploying China's regular or paramilitary forces would contribute to the Baloch militants' narrative that China is assisting the Pakistani military in the exploitation of the province's resources, representing a new form of colonisation. On the global stage, it would reinforce the perception of China's expansionist agenda driven by its military power.

Considering that the Pakistani military and intelligence agencies, with all the resources at their disposal (equipment, access to information, and control over state machinery), have failed to ensure the safety of Chinese workers, how could small contingents of Chinese troops succeed in doing so?

The failure of Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts is not merely due to a lack of financing, equipment or intelligence sources. Following its entry into the US-led "war on terror" in 2002, the Pakistani military received substantial aid, equipment, and intelligence support from the US. Yet terrorist incidents in the country continued unabated.

China should think twice before entering into Pakistan's security quagmire, which is a product of the Pakistani military itself. Sending any form of troops to Pakistan offers no guarantee of safety for its citizens and would likely expose them further to terrorists. China can strengthen Pakistan's counterterrorism measures while simultaneously questioning the will of the Pakistani military in this fight.

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RCAS Commentary

China Deepens Its Engagement With Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan

Ghulam Ali, Dec. 7, 2024

On November 23, 2024, a train with 55 carriages carrying tons of cargo arrived in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan. The train began its journey in Nantong, Jiangsu Province, China, and passed through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, taking 22 days. This was the first direct train between the two countries after the COVID-19 pandemic, and on its return journey to China, the train will carry Afghan goods.



▲ The first train arrives at Naibabad Station. Inset: Afghan Deputy Public Works Minister Mangal with the team at the station. Source: ADB Afghanistan Resident Mission.

Afghanistan-China economic relations are expanding. Two-way trade in 2023 reached \$1.3 billion, a 125 percent increase from previous years. Under an agreement signed between the two countries, from December 1, 2024, Afghan products have 100 percent duty-free access to the Chinese market. This will provide war-torn, impoverished Afghanistan with the opportunity to expand its exports.

While the train was en route, China dispatched its special envoy for Afghanistan, Yue Xiaoyong, to consult Islamabad, Kabul, and Dushanbe. On November 19, Yue held meetings with Pakistani

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officials. The meeting came at a time of tense relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan over accusations of cross-border terrorism. As in the past, China tried to ease the tensions between its two neighbors.

In Afghanistan, Yue met with Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban's acting foreign minister. Yue also invited Afghanistan to a meeting of foreign ministers from neighboring countries, which Uzbekistan would organize.

China was the first country to send its ambassador to and receive an ambassador from Afghanistan, although it has not yet formally recognized the Taliban regime. Yue Xiaoyong's interview with Tolo News, an Afghan news agency, implied that China's recognition of the Taliban government would hinge on regional consensus and the Taliban's satisfactory elimination of terrorist groups from Afghanistan's territory.

Along with China, other regional stakeholders such as Russia, Iran, and India have also increased their engagement with the Taliban.

These countries aim to secure their interests in anticipation of unexpected shifts in U.S. Afghanistan policy under incoming President Donald Trump. During its first term (2017-2021), the Trump administration signed a peace deal with the Taliban to ultimately withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan in exchange for the Taliban's guarantees that non-state actors would not be allowed to use Afghan territory against others. Later, Trump slammed the way the Biden administration withdrew U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 as the "most embarrassing moment" in U.S. history.

The impact of Trump's second term may raise concerns in some countries. However, China's Afghan policy is expected to remain unchanged, as it was during the seismic events of August 2021, when the Taliban overthrew the U.S.-installed government and renamed the country from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

China's key interests in Afghanistan are security related. It aims to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists who threaten its interests and those of its partners in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In particular, China wants to ensure that Uyghur separatists do not find sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

Additionally, China intends to extract Afghanistan's untapped resources and expand its geopolitical influence. As a neighbor and rising power, China also wants to make an economic contribution to improving the living standards of the Afghan people.

Most importantly, China recognizes that Afghanistan's geostrategic location is crucial for implementing the BRI. Two of the six corridors developed under the BRI, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, run through countries neighboring Afghanistan. In pursuit of these interests, China's Afghan policy has displayed five trends.

First, China has abandoned its decades-old, hands-off approach toward Afghanistan and has started engaging with its neighbors substantially and on a long-term basis.

Second, China is not only willing to engage Afghanistan, often called the "graveyard of empires," but also any group that rules it, be it Western-installed governments or the conservative Taliban, who are severely criticized for their approach toward women and girls' education.

Third, China has indicated an incremental shift in its focus from Pakistan to Afghanistan and Iran as the pivot of its regional connectivity. China's deliberation for the development of the Wakhan Corridor, which transits the common border between the two countries in the northeast of Afghanistan, and Iran's initiatives to enhance road and railway connectivity with Afghanistan, against the backdrop of burgeoning China-Iran relations, are signs of this shift. An Iranian official suggested the idea of Iran-Afghanistan-China connectivity and proposed a trilateral meeting to discuss it.

Some analysts rule out the possibility of opening the Wakhan Corridor anytime soon due to rugged terrain and inhospitable weather conditions. However, China possesses the experience, technology, and investment to build it should overall security conditions in Afghanistan improve and both countries develop a political consensus. China's building of the Karakorum Highway with Pakistan during the 1970s, the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, and the Three George Dams are only a few examples of its capacity to build gigantic projects in difficult conditions. Following the withdrawal of the U.S. forces, both sides have expanded their deliberations to materialize the plan in the future.

Fourth, and linked to the previous point, China is developing its Afghan policy independently of Pakistan, which it largely relied on until the early 21st century. Pakistan's troubled relations with Afghanistan and the disputed border between the two countries make it challenging for China to devise a common policy toward both countries.

Fifth, China will continue its efforts to advocate for the Taliban at various international forums while privately persuading the group not to allow non-state actors to use Afghan territory and to moderate its governance style. At China's urging, the Taliban delegation participated in the third round of the "Doha process" held in May 2024 and attended by 25 countries and regional organizations, including the European Union, the United States, Russia, and China. China termed the U.S. seizure of Afghanistan's \$7 billion in central bank reserves tantamount to "robbery" by a "bandit" and urged on several occasions to lift the freeze. Chinese state-controlled media's positive coverage of Afghanistan reflects Beijing's favorable attitude.

In conclusion, Afghanistan has gained considerable attention in China's regional strategy. This attention stems from Afghanistan's geostrategic location in relation to the BRI, security concerns, and economic logic. China's resultant policy is based on a long-term vision. External imperatives, including Trump's second term, are unlikely to result in any major changes in this policy. The train that has set off will continue its journey.

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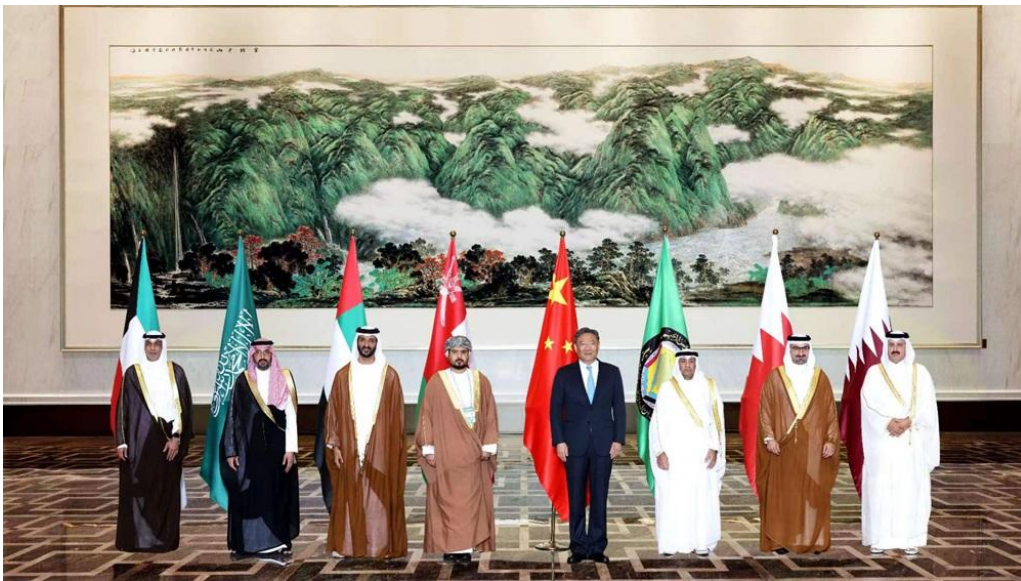
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RCAS Commentary

Trump 2.0: Gulf's Impact on China

Ghulam Ali, Dec. 15, 2024

Donald Trump will begin his second term as the 47th U.S. president on Jan. 20. This consequential development will occur just as the U.S.-China rivalry has become a decisive force in shaping global geopolitics. While the rivalry will manifest across various spheres, it will be particularly pronounced in the Persian Gulf region for several reasons.



▲ A meeting of the economic and trade ministers of China and the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council is held in Guangzhou, south China's Guangdong Province, October 22, 2023. /Chinese Commerce Ministry.

The region, which is at the core of the broader Middle East, is rich in oil and gas reserves. It also occupies a key geostrategic position at the juncture of East and West and holds spiritual significance for three major religions. Although most scholars downplay the role of religion, the truth is that religion is central to the chronic conflicts of the Middle East. Most important, the region has remained under U.S. dominance throughout its postcolonial period; therefore, as soon as China began to expand its influence, U.S. policymakers went on the alert. It was against this backdrop that Washington readjusted its strategic focus from the Indo-Pacific back to the Gulf to restrain China's influence there.

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China has developed important economic, energy, investment and technological ties with the Persian Gulf region. The relationship took an upward turn in January 2016 when President Xi Jinping visited key countries: Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran. Xi's second visit to the region in December 2022 proved even more impactful. At that time, Xi participated in three crucial China-Saudi Arabia, China-Gulf, and China-Arab World summits, heralding a new era in two-way relations.

Bull in a China shop

While Xi's 2016 visit to the Gulf alerted U.S. officials in an election year, most of them were focused on politics. The newly elected president, Donald Trump, chose Saudi Arabia for his first foreign visit in May 2017. During his four years in office (2017-21), his policies focused on consolidating the U.S. position in the Gulf region. He reversed decades of U.S. policy and international consensus by recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and accepting the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights.

Consolidating Israel's position in the region through virtually unconditional support remained at the core of U.S. Middle East policy. In 2018, the Trump administration withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — the Iran nuclear deal. In 2020, Trump brokered the Abraham Accords, which led to Israel's normalization of relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco without any progress on the Palestinian issue. The administration embedded Israel within the Arab world, formed a quasi-alliance against Iran and reduced space for China.

These policies succeeded for two reasons. First, the Gulf States were undergoing internal turmoil, which weakened their diplomacy. Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman faced severe Western criticism over human rights issues, the Saudi-led airstrikes in Yemen and the murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Most Gulf States, with the exception of Qatar, viewed Iran as a rival. In 2016, Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic ties with Iran, and from June 2017 to January 2021, Saudi Arabia and the UAE-led coalition boycotted Qatar. Further, the little diplomatic leverage Riyadh and Abu Dhabi had was used to lobby Trump to withdraw from the JCPOA, which he did in 2018.

Second, China and the Gulf states held divergent perspectives on important regional issues. For instance, unlike most Gulf states, China sought to break Iran's isolation and played a key role in finalizing the JCPOA. Gulf states viewed this role warily. Although China maintained its neutrality on the boycott of Qatar by several Gulf nations, this division affected Beijing's relations within the region.

Water under the bridge

Since Trump's first term, a lot has transpired in the Gulf region. America's lukewarm approach to the Houthi attacks on the UAE and Saudi Arabia, its unconditional support for Israel and its selective emphasis on human rights have affected the decades-old relationships between the Gulf states and the U.S., which is based on oil-for-security arrangements. Moreover, the Gulf region has reconciled intraregional disputes with the end of the boycott of Qatar in 2021, frozen the Yemen conflict, diversified partnerships and demonstrated assertiveness.

In a single decisive diplomatic move, China brokered a deal that restored the diplomatic relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023. This significant development changed the regional dynamics and improved relations between many Gulf States and Iran. In November 2023, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Saudi Arabia for the first time in years. Over the course of a year, Saudi Arabia sent its army chief to Teheran, and the two countries participated in a joint naval exercise. To prevent spoilers from undermining the nascent Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, China remained engaged with both. Earlier in November, the deputy foreign ministers from these three countries held a second meeting in Riyadh and committed to continuing their cooperation. Both China and the Gulf States share common interests in developing closer relations with Iran.

Parallel to this, relations between China and the Gulf states also improved significantly, with bilateral trade reaching \$315.8 billion in 2022. They shared a mutual perspective on the urgent need for a cease-fire in Gaza and the need for a Palestinian state as a viable resolution to the Middle East conflict. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation prioritized diplomatic efforts with China to address the Gaza crisis and sent several delegations to Beijing.

Bull in a China shop—again

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Considering the trajectory of Trump's first term, his statements during the campaign and his nominations after his victory suggest his policies will impact the Gulf region-and Gulf-state relations with China-in a number of ways.

First, Trump is likely to implement his "maximum pressure" policy on Iran, which has already been facing crippling Western sanctions. Additional curbs or even an attack, perhaps with the help of Israel, would destabilize the entire region. As mentioned before, the Gulf states no longer view Iran as a rival.

China also holds considerable interest in Iran. In March 2021, Beijing and Teheran signed their 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement, under which China promised to invest nearly \$400 billion in Iran in the coming decades. Therefore, any destabilization of Iran would directly affect the interests of the Gulf states and China alike.

Second, Trump is likely to expand the Abraham Accords by pushing other Arab and Islamic countries to normalize relations with Israel. He will particularly push for Saudi-Israeli normalization. The Biden administration negotiated a draft defense pact with Riyadh offering security guarantees against external threats in exchange for recognition of Israel. One of the objectives of this draft pact is to prevent Saudi Arabia from moving closer to China.

While Saudi-Iranian normalization might not affect Beijing, a defense pact could. Under a formal defense pact, Saudi Arabia would be legally bound to reduce its ties with China in areas that Washington considers to be against its interests.

Third, Trump will likely resort to luxury arms deals. Oil-rich Gulf monarchies are driven by a deep-seated sense of vulnerability to their regimes, which pushes them to seek security assurances and invest heavily in weapon acquisitions. They would be willing to purchase expensive yet sophisticated U.S. weapons.

China does not have a significant share of the Gulf arms market, nor does it offer weapons that are attractive, given their relatively low quality compared with those of the United States. The combination of U.S. arms incentives and formal defense arrangements — such as the proposed defense pact with Saudi Arabia, the signing of the Comprehensive Security Integration and

Prosperity Agreement, or C-SIPA, with Bahrain (2023), a 10-year extension of its military presence at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar (2024) and granting major defense partner status to the UAE (2024) — would strengthen the U.S. position in the Gulf and limit China's strategic space.

Fifth, Trump may intensify the Biden administration's policy of pressuring the Gulf States to take sides. Under such pressure, some Saudi and Emirati tech and defense companies divested from China. Given the Gulf rulers' security dependence on the U.S., they may simply comply, albeit reluctantly.

Finally, Trump may leverage his personal connections with Gulf monarchies to enhance strategic cooperation. He has built strong ties with the Saudi ruling elite. His son-in-law, Jared Kushner (who may play a role in the new administration) maintained relationships with the Saudi royal family even during Trump's time out of office. Additionally, public fund managers from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have invested in Elon Musk's Tesla. Representatives of Gulf public investment funds were seen sitting next to Trump after his election victory. These personal relationships are crucial for navigating significant diplomatic challenges. In contrast, Chinese diplomacy has not emphasized building personal connections, at least in the Middle East. This may put China at a disadvantage.

Conclusion

The Gulf region has become an important theater of the China-U.S. rivalry. As a long-term dominant player in the region, the United States views China's inroads as a challenge to its supremacy. On the other hand, China has developed crucial energy, economic, investment and technological interests there. During Trump's first term, the U.S. strengthened its position through luxury arms deals and integrated Israel into the Arab world. The Biden administration has utilized defense treaties and applied pressure where necessary to compel regional countries to divest from China.

While uncertainty surrounds what Trump's policies might be during U.S. Presidency 2.0, a more confrontational approach is likely to emerge when considering the trajectory of U.S. policy. However, given the unity of the Gulf states, their diversified partnerships and their degree of assertiveness — along with China's overall rise on the global stage and its deepened

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relationships in the region — U.S. dominance may be constrained. Even so, China must devise policies to navigate the unexpected strategic challenges it might encounter.

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<https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/trump-20-gulfs-impact-on-china>. (<http://www.rcas.top/Commentary/266.html>)*

RCAS Commentary

From Impeachment to Instability: Can South Korea Safeguard its Democracy?

Sujit Kumar Datta, Dec. 20, 2024

South Korea is a politically prosperous country in East Asia, known for its democratic institutions and stable political environment. However, the country has recently faced a domestic political crisis. The impeachment motion against the president and the ongoing debate has exposed the deep crisis in the democratic system. The country is facing a stern test of democracy with the impeachment of President Yoon Suk Yeol.



▲ Protesters take part in a rally calling for the impeachment of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, who declared martial law, which was reversed hours later, in Seoul, South Korea, December 13, 2024.

President Yoon recently declared martial law to counter anti-government forces and North Korean threats. The decision has caused deep concern among the country's people and the international community. The current president of South Korea has been accused of abuse of power, bribery, and violation of democratic values. The opposition and civil society have long complained that the presidential administration lacked transparency and accountability.

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In 2017, Park Geun-hye was impeached on corruption charges. Millions of people took to the streets to protest for democracy. The current situation is essentially a repeat of that time. Martial law was imposed in South Korea for the first time since the introduction of parliamentary democracy in 1987. President Yoon's decision to impose martial law brought back old meYoon, who had experienced military rule during the Park Chung-hee regime in 1979.

In a televised address to the nation, President Yoon said the move was taken to protect South Korea from anti-government forces. However, the people and the Parliament considered the move arbitrary and undemocratic. Hours after martial law was enacted, South Korea's National Assembly took action against it. Two hundred four Korea's 300-member Parliament voted to impeach President Yoon. On the contrary, 85 members opposed it. In addition, three lawmakers were absent from the House, and eight votes were declared invalid.

This vote reflects the country's people's commitment to democratic practices and the country's people's resistance to military rule. After a majority of lawmakers backed impeachment in Parliament, the fate of President Yoon Suk-yeol will now be decided by the South's Constitutional Court. The country's court will resubmit South Yun's dismissal within the country's months. The president must step down for good if the Judiciary Council votes favour impeachment. If Yoon is removed from the presidency, the country will have to hold elections in two months to elect a new president.

As a result of the impeachment, President Yoon lost executive powers, and Prime Minister Han Dak Soo served as acting president. The foundations of democracy are transparency, accountability, and justice. However, democracy has been negatively affected by the power struggle between political parties and the spread of misinformation during the impeachment process against the president. This has eroded public confidence in political institutions and created a deep social divide.

The current political situation in South Korea carries an important signal for the country's democratic system. The imposition of martial law and the president's impeachment of the country has raised questions about the strength and sustainability of democratic institutions. The court will decide on his removal or reinstatement within six months.

The situation in South Korea has sparked a widespread reaction in the international community. Major international powers, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and India, have expressed concern. The United States is a longstanding ally and strategic partner of South Korea. The United States has stressed safeguarding South Korea's democratic stability. The US Congress has discussed the issue in detail and expressed its support for South Korea's constitutional process. Britain has expressed concern over South Korea's impeachment. On the other hand, the European Union has expressed its support for democracy in South Korea. European Parliament adopted a resolution to protect Korean democracy.

Resolving South Korea's political crisis requires a clear and precise vision. Korea is important to ensure transparency and follow the constitutional process when investigating allegations against the president. At the same time, political parties must go beyond competing for power and act in the national interest. The future of South Korean democracy largely depends on the decision of the Constitutional Court. If the court removes President Yoon, it will be a victory for democracy.

However, if President Yoon remains in office, it could have long-term effects on democratic institutions. The current political crisis in South Korea is an instructive example for the country and the Asian democracies. People's confidence in democracy and their firm stand is People's way out of this crisis. If the South Korean people and their institutions succeed in dealing with this crisis, it will be considered a milestone in the country's democratic history.

This crisis is a political phenomenon and a challenge to the stability and future of the country's democratic institutions. South Korean people and country leaders should learn from this crisis and strengthen democratic values.

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RCAS Commentary

Gwadar Port Highlights Precarity in Pakistan's Geopolitical Balancing Act

Muneeb Yousuf, Dec. 20, 2024

Eight months after the February 2024 general elections, Pakistan's politics continue to be marred by political, economic and security challenges. The country's most popular politician, Imran Khan, remains in jail, the coalition government lacks legitimacy and the military establishment continues to hold veto power over the government's policies.



▲ Security officials examine at the site of an explosion which occurred near Karachi airport in Karachi on late Oct 6.(AFP).

Pakistan is also facing acute security challenges. Terrorist attacks have increased in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan since October, targeting Chinese nationals working on critical infrastructure projects.

In September 2024, leaked military and diplomatic documents claiming that Pakistan has privately agreed to grant China approval for a military base at the strategic port of Gwadar in Balochistan surfaced. Both Pakistan and China have denied these claims, but the accusation sheds light on Pakistan's internal security problems and its delicate relations with China and the United States.

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Pakistan's foreign policy is under significant economic and geopolitical pressure. While Islamabad shares longstanding military and investment ties with Washington, it has also cultivated a strong relationship with Beijing predicated on mutual animosity toward New Delhi.

US–Pakistan relations have deteriorated since the 2020–21 US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Pakistani government and military's attempts to repair ties with the United States have failed to yield meaningful dividends, such as securing a crucial International Monetary Fund (IMF) package. These diplomatic manoeuvres have visibly frustrated China, which views such overtures as a potential shift in allegiance to Washington.

Pakistan's motivation behind potentially approving a military base would stem from the country's economic and security problems. Reliance on IMF loans to keep the economy afloat, mounting debt repayments and persistent difficulties to raise capital have pushed Pakistan to renegotiate loan terms with China. Unlike previous years when Pakistan extracted strategic rent from the United States which paid for its exports and military modernisation, the country now finds its geopolitical significance substantially diminished.

If Pakistan were to grant a military base to China, it would face a dilemma. Beijing's access to the base could alleviate Pakistan's economic crisis and ensure that a continuous supply of advanced military hardware enters the country. But it would also lead to further deterioration of ties with the United States and affect Pakistan's strategic autonomy.

If a military base were to be approved, internal security challenges would also be exacerbated. Baloch insurgents and other militant groups could be encouraged to increase attacks targeting Chinese nationals and development infrastructure. The Balochistan Liberation Army views the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor as a mechanism which furthers the economic marginalisation of the Baloch community. Baloch insurgents could exploit the situation to strengthen regional sentiments, which have long viewed the Pakistani state as unfairly appropriating mineral and gas reserves.

Rising attacks on Chinese infrastructure projects and workers have prompted Beijing to push for joint military mechanisms with Pakistan to safeguard Chinese citizens and projects in the country. Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Jiang Zaidong has maintained that security threats are the

primary constraint behind the slow progress of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and has exhorted the Pakistani government to strengthen the security of Chinese personnel, institutions and projects.

But this push is unlikely to lead to a resolution, as there is little clarity on the role of Chinese guards in Pakistan if joint security were to be implemented and whether they would be able to participate in combat operations in case of attack.

There would be a score of foreign policy and internal security implications for Pakistan if the claims made by the Drop Site portal-based on leaked military and diplomatic documents-are accepted at face value. The aim is not to assess the merits of these claims, but to speculate about what implications such developments may have upon Pakistan’s relationship with the United States, China and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Given this, it would not be prudent for Pakistan to take sides in the US-China rivalry, which is set to intensify with the re-election of former US president Donald Trump. Islamabad is not a likely priority for the Trump cabinet, yet Washington would not wish for Islamabad to fall into Beijing’s lap.

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RCAS Commentary

A New Power Triangle? The Potential Alliance between ASEAN, the GCC and China

Ghulam Ali, Dec. 24, 2024

During his visit to China on 4-7 November 2024, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to participate in the second summit between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), or the ASEAN-GCC summit which would take place in Kuala Lumpur in 2025. To ensure the participation of heavyweight leaders in the summit, Ibrahim, during his visit to Riyadh a few days later, also invited Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.



▲ Delegates at the Asean-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit in Riyadh on 20 October 2023. (Ministry of Communications and Information of Singapore).

Anwar's formation of an informal advisory board for the ASEAN summit, which includes former Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra as an adviser, reflects his intentions for its success. While the Malaysian opposition is skeptical, Thaksin's expertise can help navigate the China-US rivalry and the Myanmar crisis—two main challenges that could impact the summit under Malaysia's chair.

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Among them, the China-ASEAN partnership is the oldest, most mature and most multifaceted.

On 13 December, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan reiterated Malaysia's commitment to the trilateral summit and elaborated on the strength of each component. He stated that the GCC possessed significant capital, ASEAN possessed rich natural resources and development potential, and China boasted of a vast market, manufacturing capabilities and investment potential. He added that cooperation among these three could “form a new, substantial bloc with a significant impact on the global economy”.

The first ASEAN-GCC summit took place in Riyadh in 2023. On that occasion, both regional blocs outlined their five-year agenda and decided to hold a biennial summit, alternating between the GCC and ASEAN regions. The upcoming Kuala Lumpur summit is a part of that agreement. Malaysia, which officially assumes the chair of ASEAN on 1 Jan 2025, intends to make the summit highly impactful.

China's involvement in ASEAN

Three separate components of this emerging strategic triangle — the China-ASEAN, the ASEAN-GCC and the GCC-China — have developed to summit levels. Among them, the China-ASEAN partnership is the oldest, most mature and most multifaceted. The cooperation goes back to 1996, when China joined ASEAN as a full dialogue partner. Currently, China is one of the 17 dialogue partners of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and one of ASEAN Plus Three (APT), along with Japan and South Korea.

China and ASEAN have established the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) and are currently negotiating to upgrade and expand its provisions. The level of engagement could be measured by the fact that in 2023, the China-ASEAN trade volume reached an impressive US\$911.7 billion, making China and ASEAN each other's largest trading partners for four consecutive years. In October 2024, Chinese Premier Li Qiang participated in the 27th China-ASEAN and ASEAN Plus Three summits.

While GCC members are generally positive about Trump's return to power, they, like the rest of the world, remain perplexed about how a triumphant Trump reshapes the Gulf region.

The second component of the triangle, China-GCC cooperation, has also developed to a summit level. The first China-GCC summit took place during President Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022. This led to increased bilateral cooperation, doubling their trade from 2015 to 2022, reaching US\$316 billion in 2022.

The third ASEAN-GCC component has also evolved into summit-level cooperation. Cooperation between the two regional blocs started in the late 1980s with the first ministerial meeting convened in June 2009 in Manama, Bahrain, and the first ASEAN-GCC summit held in October 2023 in Riyadh, as mentioned before.

The plan to invite China to the second ASEAN-GCC summit was conceived before the US elections, in which Donald Trump won a landslide victory. The election results prompted these partners to expand their coordination. All three have varying degrees of uncertainty and concerns about future US policies. While GCC members are generally positive about Trump's return to power, they, like the rest of the world, remain perplexed about how a triumphant Trump reshapes the Gulf region.

Trump's potential tariffs and impact

Geopolitically, although ASEAN does not feature as prominently in US policies as the Middle East and China, it remains apprehensive, being the fourth-largest trading partner after Mexico, Canada and China, with US\$269.8 billion in exports to the US in 2023. Thus, ASEAN would not have escaped the effects if Trump had enacted his proposed 10% tariff policy or if there had been shocks in other parts of the world.

Out of these three components of this triangle, China will bear the brunt of the Trump administration's second-term policies. Trump is likely to impose heavy tariffs, up to 100% tariffs, along with additional restrictions on China's access to critical technologies. Like the first term, the Trump administration might push China to enter into a trade agreement to address the trade deficit and invest in the US.

Ripples from US policies are occurring at a time when several ASEAN and GCC member states are already drifting toward the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS

(Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa), of which China is a founding member. At the 12th BRICS Summit held in Russia in October this year, four ASEAN countries-Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand-joined BRICS as partner countries, while Laos and Myanmar have expressed interest. From the GCC, the UAE has been a full member of BRICS since January 2024, while Saudi Arabia has been invited to join BRICS but has not yet formally done so.

Five GCC members-Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, and Kuwait (with the exception of Oman)-and two ASEAN members, Cambodia and Myanmar, are dialogue partners of the SCO. On the other hand, the US applied for observer status in the SCO in 2005 but was rejected.

Strategic considerations

The upcoming Kuala Lumpur summit will potentially connect two regional blocs and China into a strategic triangle. Malaysia is pursuing this objective wholeheartedly. While the nature of China's engagement, whether as a dialogue partner or full member, is yet to be decided, the possibility of becoming a full partner of the ASEAN-GCC summit cannot be ruled out for the future. The fact that many member countries of the two blocs have close partnerships with China will facilitate this.

By the time of the summit, Trump's policies will have been clear to all three and might bring them together to protect their interests. In addition to geopolitical ripples, the two regional blocs and China have several complementarities. They are geographically closer, share mutual interests and are connected through energy surpluses and demands, labour surpluses and demands, two-way investments, market forces, and a non-interference approach to each other's internal affairs.

Any major development begins with an idea, and that idea has emerged. If ASEAN-GCC Plus China forms a strategic triangle, it would create a significant bloc that would impact the Asia-Pacific political landscape.

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RCAS Commentary

D-8 Summit and the New Era of Global Cooperation

Sujit Kumar Datta, Dec. 25, 2024

The 11th D-8 Summit in Cairo, Egypt, is a significant milestone for Bangladesh regarding South-South cooperation. As the current chair of the D-8 alliance, Bangladesh has pledged to reach new heights in South-South cooperation by demonstrating its leadership. In preparation for international relations, South-South has emerged as an important concept. Established in 1997, the D-8, or Developing Organization, aims to promote economic empowerment among eight politically oriented developing countries.



▲ PRESS XPRESS.

The organization's member countries are Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Türkiye. The 11th D-8 summit opens a new horizon for South-South positioning, an important opportunity to enhance strategic partnership and position among developing countries. The main objective of the D-8 organization was to accelerate economic and social development in developing countries.

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The organization seeks to strengthen economic relations among member countries through trade, agriculture, industry, government, and energy sectors. In 1997, this issue was witnessed through various votes and passed at the beginning of the Imbul outside world.

The primary objectives of the D-8 were:

- Increase trade and investment between member countries
- Adopting technical plans to ensure signature development
- Strengthen communication through technology and knowledge
- Globalization of developing countries

The 11th D-8 summit takes place at a special moment when issues such as the global economy, climate change, and technological change have created new challenges and opportunities for developing countries.

The main topics of the conference were:

- Trade Cooperation: Increasing intra-trade by reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers between member countries
- Tackling Climate Change: Joint initiatives aimed at protecting the environment and increasing the use of renewable energy
- Technological Innovation: Planning to harness the Digital Economy's Opportunities and the Fourth Industrial Revolution
- Human Resource Development: Education Development and Skill Enhancement Schemes.

The D-8 can become a model for cooperation among member countries and other developing countries in the Southern perspective. South-South cooperation differs from North-South cooperation because it is based on equality, mutual respect, and exchange of experiences. There is enormous potential for trade between the D-8 countries. In 2021, D-8's domestic trade was about \$130 billion. The conference set a target of reaching \$500 billion by 2030. Efforts to form

a free trade area among member countries are significant. The risks of climate change are severe for developing countries.

The D-8 countries plan to collaborate on renewable energy production, forestry, and reducing carbon emissions. Countries like Bangladesh, where the impacts of climate change are very evident, can directly benefit from this cooperation. At the D-8 conference, member countries agreed to seize the opportunities of the fourth industrial revolution. Member countries can advance technological development by cooperating in the digital economy, e-commerce, and fintech sectors.

Bangladesh is one of the important member countries of D-8. At the 11th summit, Bangladesh reflected on its economic and strategic priorities. Bangladesh's expected benefits from D-8 include Trade expansion, entering new markets, and increasing export earnings. Coping with the effects of climate change: Obtaining the necessary technology and funding through international cooperation. Human Resource Development: Exchange experience and training with member countries.

There are some challenges in realizing the potential of D-8. Notable challenges include:

- Political instability: Internal political instability of member countries.
- Lack of funding: Lack of adequate funding for joint projects.
- Lack of adequate policies and frameworks: Developing an effective policy for cooperation.

Addressing these challenges requires effective diplomacy, long-term planning, and mutual trust and cooperation among member states.

The 11th D-8 Summit ushered in a new era of South-South cooperation. It has provided a powerful platform for developing countries to work together to address common challenges and seize opportunities. D-8 is an important platform for Bangladesh that has created unique opportunities for economic development, climate change mitigation, and technological advancement.

However, realizing these potentials requires effective leadership and coherent and sustainable strategies. The success of the D-8 could become a model for South-South cooperation, opening new horizons for the entire developing world. Platforms like the D-8 can be a powerful means of promoting solidarity and achieving economic prosperity among developing countries through South-South cooperation.

The 11th D-8 Summit is an important platform for Bangladesh, where the country has demonstrated its leadership qualities and set a new benchmark in South-South cooperation. This conference was an excellent success for Bangladesh regarding trade, economy, and field.

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RCAS Commentary

China and India Rebuild Trust on the Path to Reconciliation

Ghulam Ali, Dec. 27, 2024

On 23 October 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a delegate-level meeting-the first in five years-on the sidelines of the BRICS conference in Kazan, Russia. During the meeting, both leaders endorsed an earlier deal to disengage their militaries along the disputed border, restoring the status quo to its pre-2020 position. Within a week, both sides withdrew troops from border face-off areas.



▲ Chinese President Xi Jinping meets with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the 16th BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, Oct. 23, 2024. (Xinhua/Shen Hong).

Given the potential impact of the China-India relationship on regional and global affairs, the Xi-Modi meeting drew international headlines. Analysts characterised it as a boon for both countries, a cautionary note and a tactical pause rather than a strategic shift in relations. Some credited the outcome to BRICS and Russia, while others viewed it as a blow to the US Indo-Pacific strategy.

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China and India have the world's longest and oldest disputed border-the Line of Actual Control (LAC)-inherited from colonial times. They fought a border war in 1962 and have had periodic escalations over this issue ever since. Both countries hold differing views on the boundary-India considers the LAC to be 3488 kilometres long, while China claims it is 2000 kilometres, arguing its border with Pakistan is already settled.

In the 21st century, China-India relations have come full circle, moving from deeper understanding to heightened tension and back to normalcy. In the mid-2010s, the relationship took a hostile turn after decades of stability. While the disputed border sparked conflict, two new factors proved to be key ignitors.

Nationalist leaders-President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi-assumed power, setting high goals and pursuing assertive policies. Concurrently, the bifurcation of global politics into a US vs China dynamic fuelled the rivalry. The disputed border, two nationalist leaders and international politics combined in a mutually reinforcing way, escalating the tension.

Nationalistic fervour in China and India extended to soldiers patrolling the disputed border. Troops faced a standoff lasting over 70 days in Doklam in 2017 and a fatal confrontation in Galwan Valley in June 2020, resulting in the deaths of 20 Indians and at least four Chinese soldiers-marking the first fatalities in decades. Following this, the relationship largely remained frozen until the Xi-Modi meeting.

During heightened tensions, both countries viewed each other's policies with concern. New Delhi perceived China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as part of a grand strategy and saw the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)-in which China invested billions of dollars-and China's administrative control of Gwadar Port as a consolidation of a China-Pakistan nexus targeting India.

On the other hand, China regarded India's closeness with the United States, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Taiwan and other Western countries with suspicion. The Quadrilateral security grouping, which China views as a containment strategy, regained momentum against the backdrop of India's intensifying conflict with China.

India's defence-related agreements with the United States were also concerning for China. These included the agreements to provide reciprocal access to military bases as well as to share geospatial intelligence and enhance the accuracy of military operations. In line with this, the United States rebranded its Asia Pacific strategy to an Indo-Pacific strategy centred on cooperation with India.

It was economic pressures that catalysed China's and India's re-engagement. Following the Galwan fatalities, India's ban on Chinese investment and technology impacted negatively on India's economic growth. This downturn led to unemployment-especially among educated youth, who expressed their frustration in the 2024 general elections-resulting in the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party losing its simple majority. India's annual economic survey for 2024 pinpointed the need to attract investment from China-causing India's business community to push the Modi administration towards rapprochement.

India's obsession with the BRI as a grand strategy also faded over time. Though New Delhi did not join the BRI, it benefited from its subsidiary, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. CPEC did not take off and Gwadar Port remains far from becoming China's naval hub. In 2019, China also stopped blocking the Pakistani military-backed extremist Masood Azhar from being declared a global terrorist by the United Nations, which abated India's concerns about the so-called China-Pakistan nexus.

Parallel to this, India did not receive the expected US and Western support for its 'Made in India' initiative and industrialisation efforts. The US-led 'India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor', meant to counter the BRI, never materialised. Overall, it became clear to New Delhi that achieving great power status requires cooperation with Beijing, prompting an eagerness for reconciliation.

On the Chinese side, Beijing recognised that the success of the Quad and the United States' Indo-Pacific policies primarily hinged on India's role. It was assuaging for China that despite US incentives, India did not sign any formal military alliance and maintained its traditional position of non-alignment. During its own economic slowdown, China could not ignore the large Indian

market next door, where trade thrived and reached US\$118 billion in 2023-24 despite geopolitical tensions.

Over the years, Xi and Modi have tempered their ambitious goals with pragmatism. They have gained global exposure and navigated their countries through challenging waters. Through cycles of stability, heightened tension and a return to equilibrium, China and India have learned that conflict undermines their long-term objectives and complicates the boundary issues.

While a breakthrough in their border dispute may remain elusive, the Xi–Modi meeting has put the relationship back on track and this is likely to be sustained.

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RCAS Commentary

The Sino-Russian Alliance: Reality or Strategic Advantage?

Sujit Kumar Datta, Dec. 31, 2024

China and Russia elevated their relationship in February 2022, just ahead of the start of Russia's military campaign against Ukraine. A "limitless friendship" between Beijing and Moscow, jointly announced, will underpin deeper trade, energy, and security cooperation. The announcement comes against a backdrop of global politics exacerbated by the Ukraine crisis and a dramatic downturn in Russia's relationship with the Western world. This alliance between China and Russia made many people think it would forge a new style of cooperation that would contend for a new powerful bloc to rival the West.



▲ PRESS XPRESS.

However, doubts about the relationship's importance and strategic benefits have emerged. China's foreign policy has always had a two-tier approach, particularly with its strategic interests and economic ties with the West at the forefront of its ties to Russia and other great powers in international relations. China is strategically standing with Russia by announcing that it is standing with Russia in the war in Ukraine, but China has not been directly involved in this war.

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Instead, China wanted to preserve its role as a “practical mediator,” which would not take a side in the war but would shore up its position on the world stage. This policy suited China. Because this is the world’s second-largest economy, and most of the world’s trade is with the United States and Europe. China knows close relations with Russia are risky for its economic and strategic relations with the West. Consequently, China has been careful in its engagement with Russia. While “limitless friendship” sounds graphically attractive, the relationship between China and Russia is predicated on strategic gain.

The relations of Beijing and Moscow have stirred a flurry of discussions in China in recent months. Although some even back closer ties with Russia, many doubt excessive reliance on Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s May visit to China is a glaring example of this conundrum. While Putin called Xi Jinping “as close as a brother” during the visit, Xi Jinping called Putin “a good friend and a good neighbour.” Such a reaction shows China is beginning to draw the line on its relationship with Russia. China has tried to make it clear that it does not want to become directly involved in the war in Ukraine or any other military conflict and that it does not want to identify itself as an ally of Russia. Two years into the war, the crisis in Ukraine has no foreseeable resolution and military and political chaos in Russia is increasingly becoming an issue of interest to China.

The mutiny by the Wagner Group in 2023, while forces have moved into Russia’s Kursk region, has drawn attention to Russia’s fragility in the eyes of China. Such events are an important sign to China that the time has come to rethink the Russian state’s capabilities and its armed forces readiness. The Wagner mutiny mirrors Russia’s internal tensions and security struggles. The history of the past three decades tells us that regime stability in Russia declines whenever the country is confronted with severe internal or external crises. Chinese rulers are also learning from these disputes and are behaving more cautiously in their relations with Russia.

Trust each other enough intensely for the stability of the region. Russia has never committed to stand by China, especially in a dispute over Taiwan, and China has never directly backed Russia in its war in Ukraine. In Hicham’s case, the absence of this trust is a hurdle to a potential partnership between the countries. The other hot topic of the China-Russian partnership is economic cooperation. Despite being China’s most powerful economic partner, China’s overall

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trade aligns more with the Western world than with Russia. China's main trading partners are Europe and America; these partnerships matter more to the Chinese economy than any other. Old habits are hard to break, and China knows it has to use the economy to influence the world stage—the West's ventures.

China has repeatedly proven its stagnant economy and weak trade with Russia depend on the Western economic system. Russia, by contrast, wants to obliterate the current international order and create a new one, whereas China wants to reshape the existing order by establishing itself at its centre. Older than in the system. For this reason, China's policy toward Russia is risky. History has demonstrated that China's attempts to tie up with Russia were always defeated. Moreover, the Sino-Soviet struggle, particularly in the 1960s, damaged China strategically.

Right now, China is critical to keeping strategic ties with the West. China knows that Europe and the USA are essential for China. A China-America relationship helps secure long-term stability and economic growth for China. If China draws too close to Russia, it risks being drawn into, if not conspiracies of isolation from the West that will imperil China's strategic stance. China needs to take a significant role in leading the world.

As for China, it must define its relations with Russia and limit them to security, even in politics and the economy. With the new international inventory, China became a strong country that now sets the rules in the economy. Still, there is a strategy, too. However, China, in this respect, does require a balanced foreign policy, on the one hand, keeping relations with Russia while, on the other hand, continuing economic cooperation with the West.

Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the margins of the BRICS conference, Putin said: "It can be stated with confidence that China and Russia have become examples for the rest of the world, providing the models for how relations between states should be built in the modern world." The Russian leader noted that this is a mutually beneficial multilateral cooperation relationship on an equal footing. A three-day BRICS summit is in progress in Kazan, Russia. Some world leaders at the top level went to Russia to participate in this conference.

The first large-scale international conference has been held in Russia since military operations began in Ukraine. Although Russia and China are considered 'borderless' strategic partners,

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they compete for interests and influence in Central Asia. Moscow has historical links with five countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. However, China’s growing economic muscle and investment in these countries have reduced Russian influence.

Russia’s relations with the West are at their lowest point since the Cold War. For its part, Sino-U.S. relations have also turned perilous. Time for China to respond soberly to Russia’s suspension of the New Start Treaty. The agreement is of great significance in promoting peace and stability, Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said of the agreement. Beijing hopes the two can properly manage their differences.

In contrast, Russia has sided firmly with China as tensions have flared between China and the United States over the Taiwan question. The two nations also demonstrate their close connections in the defence sphere through military exercises. China, Russia, and South Africa are conducting naval exercises this week in the Indian Ocean. Two countries’ good relations do not look right to the West. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, concerned about Chinese help for the Kremlin’s war effort, said Thursday that any such effort would be a “serious problem”.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the US-led military alliance, said in an interview that the group had some indications that China may provide arms support to Russia. He made the remarks after being asked by the AP news agency in the Polish capital, Warsaw. The NATO chief again strongly urged Beijing against taking such steps, warning that such an initiative by China would seriously violate international law. However, many believe the US and its allies have ‘perceived the Russia-Ukraine conflict through tinted glasses’.

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