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# **EAST ASIA MILITARY MONITOR**

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**Editor**

**Prashant Kumar Singh**

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

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This issue of the *East Asia Military Monitor* covers military security developments of critical importance that have taken place during the two months under review. During this period, the region has been witness to China's military aggression that many have found hard to explain convincingly. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has indulged in unprovoked aggression in the South China Sea and the East China Sea and in the Himalayas where it grapples with maritime and land border disputes. Similarly, it demonstrated the same aggressive posture in the Taiwan Strait, targeting Taiwan. What has left the concerned scholarly and policy-making circles perplexed is their inability to make a rational assessment of the motives behind these aggressive moves. In the backdrop of the raging COVID-19 pandemic, there has hardly been any information available that can suggest any provocation from China's maritime and land neighbours which can justify the military actions the PLA has taken in the contested maritime and land territories. Also, China's willingness to open fronts in the East and West simultaneously, discarding its conventional, yet sensible, 'fear' about a two front-war without any compelling reason, defies common sense. This situation appears to be a combination of factors. It might have stemmed from the leadership's need to externalize domestic political problems that it might have perceived in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. It might be a result of misreading of the global situation stemming from President Donald Trump's relentless push against China. Thus, as a consequence, this show of aggression may have been employed to convey a message about China's national strength, domestically and internationally. This situation may have been a product of China's new-found confidence and sense of optimism. Its widely-accepted efficient handling of the COVID-19 after the initial hiccups and the favourable economic forecasts may have shaped this confidence and optimism. China has been unaffected by the assessment that its indiscriminate aggression is pushing the countries which were non-committal in the China-US 'Cold-War', towards the US. These contradictions have clearly shown up in the period under review. The contributors have tracked the relevant military and security developments across the region, and the commentary, "Military Developments in the South China Sea amidst COVID-19", is especially interesting.

Dr. Prashant Kumar Singh

Associate Fellow, MP-IDSA

# COMMENTARY

## MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AMIDST COVID-19



MRITTIKA GUHA SARKAR

*Mrityika Guha Sarkar is a research scholar at the Centre for East Asian Studies (CEAS), School of International Studies (SIS) in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She is also an Editorial Assistant to the Series Editor for "Routledge Studies on Think Asia".*

Tensions are brewing in the South China Sea (SCS) amidst fears of China leveraging the COVID-19 pandemic to bolster and expand its military foothold in the region. Even as the pandemic wreaks havoc around the world, the coercive actions by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) through military adventurism in the disputed region, have continued unabated.<sup>1</sup>

### China's Military Assertiveness in SCS

In March 2020, China established two new research stations –the Yongshu and the Zhubi research stations – under the Integrated Research Center for Islands and Reefs of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS).<sup>2</sup> Importantly, both the stations built floating and land-based monitoring systems alarming the countries that lay claim over the SCS as well as other regional actors. Further, in April 2020, a Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessel sank a Vietnamese fishing boat carrying eight crew members on board near the disputed Paracel Islands. Notably, this marked the second time in the past 12 months when China had assertively sunk a Southeast Asian nation's vessel.<sup>3</sup> In response to the incident, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying accused the Vietnamese side instead, of intruding in Chinese waters and trying to ram the Chinese vessel.<sup>4</sup> Later in April, China sailed its survey ship *Haiyang Dizhi 8* off the Malaysian coast to closely follow a Malaysian ship exploring for the state oil company Petronas in waters claimed by both Malaysia and Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> Besides, more than a

<sup>1</sup> China's military actions in the disputed region of SCS has led many China observers to criticize Beijing for utilizing the pandemic as a 'strategic window of opportunity' to enhance its control over the region. On the contrary, China has dismissed the accusations and clarified its actions in the region as regular military exercises aimed to safeguard national sovereignty. Please see, Abraham Denmark, Charles Edel, and Siddharth Mohandas, "Same as it Ever Was: China's Pandemic Opportunism on its Periphery", *War on the Rocks*, April 16, 2020 at <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/same-as-it-ever-was-chinas-pandemic-opportunism-on-its-periphery/> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> "New Research Stations Come into Operation on Nansha Islands", *Xinhua*, March 20, 2020 at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/20/c\\_138898845.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/20/c_138898845.htm) (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, "China Leverages Covid-19 Crisis in South China Sea", *Asia Times*, April 9, 2020 at <https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/chinas-covid-19-imperialism-spreads-in-south-china-sea/> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on April 3, 2020", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, April 03, 2020 at [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1765751.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1765751.shtml) (Accessed on July 10, 2020)

<sup>5</sup> "Malaysia Calls for Peaceful End to Months-long South China Sea Standoff", *The Economic Times*, April 23, 2020 at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/malaysia-calls-for-peaceful-end-to-months-long-south-china-sea-standoff/articleshow/75318714.cms> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

hundred Chinese vessels were spotted near the Philippines-occupied Thitu Island located in the SCS region between January and February 2020.<sup>6</sup> If anything, China's military actions were resonating a provocative posture and a revisionist desire to achieve its core strategic goals in the region by employing non-military assets such as the CCG vessels.

China's revisionist posture in the region was further reiterated as Beijing set up two new administrative districts in the disputed waters which came under the authority of the local government in Sansha, a city in the southern island of Hainan. In particular, China's Ministry of Civil Affairs had proclaimed, "the State Council has recently approved the establishment of the Xisha and Nansha districts under Sansha city."<sup>7</sup> As per the notice, the Xisha administration would be based in Woody Island, also known as Yongxing Island; and the Nansha administration will be located in the Fiery Cross Reef.<sup>8</sup> Arguably, this move by China was an effort to incrementally strengthen its jurisdiction over the region as artificial islands, as essential infrastructures were already in place.

Moreover, China had been conducting military exercises and patrol missions to sustain its presence in the region, with the latest exercise conducted by the PLA being as recent as July 1-5, 2020, showcasing its increasing military capability as well as its coercive posture to control the SCS.

To put this in perspective, China had aimed to expand its territorial control over the disputed region rather tactfully: on the one hand, it was negotiating the issue with the discussants and trying to resolve the dispute peacefully through the Code of Conduct (CoC); on the other, it was gradually and unilaterally occupying the region through administrative and military moves. Interestingly, China under the Xi administration had been utilizing the modernization of the PLA and the Civil-Military fusion by involving the CCG to participate in wartime activities to project its sovereignty claims in the region without escalating to a war-like situation.<sup>9</sup> The CCG have nominally been civilian maritime law enforcement bodies which had been merged into the military command structure through its subordination to the People's Armed Police (PAP) to play a substantial role in SCS and the East China Sea (ECS), apart from the PLA. China had also been seeking to declare an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the region by expanding control and capabilities in the SCS.<sup>10</sup> If implemented, this could allow China to treat a substantial part of the South China Sea as internal waters where no foreign vessels could enter without Beijing's permission, eventually altering the trade routes, fishing rights, and freedom of navigation in these areas.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Francis Mangosing, "PH Military Spots 136 Chinese Vessels near Pag-asa Island since January 2020", *Inquirer.net*, March 02, 2020 at <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/185765/ph-military-spots-136-chinese-vessels-near-pag-asa-island-since-january-2020> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Kinling Lo, "Beijing Moves to Strengthen Grip over Disputed South China Sea", *South China Morning Post*, April 18, 2020 at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3080559/beijing-moves-strengthen-grip-over-disputed-south-china-sea> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Liu Xin, "Sansha city Establishes Two Districts for Better Management", *Global Times*, April 18, 2020, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1186004.shtml> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Lyle J. Morris, "The Era of Coast Guards in the Asia-Pacific is Upon Us", RAND Corporation, March 08, 2017 at <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/03/the-era-of-coast-guards-in-the-asia-pacific-is-upon.html> (Accessed April 7, 2020); Mark Beeson, "The State and Security in Asia", Middle East Institute, January 21, 2016 at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/state-and-security-asia> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Kelvin Chen, "China to Set Up ADIZ in South China Sea", *Taiwan News*, May 05, 2020 at <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3928503> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Center for Preventive Action, "Military Confrontation in the South China Sea", Council on Foreign Relations, May 21, 2020 at <https://www.cfr.org/report/military-confrontation-south-china-sea> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

## Notable Responses by Claimant Countries

Such an assertive approach by China in the SCS region received considerable pushback from claimant states. In April, following the incident in which a Chinese ship rammed and sunk a Vietnamese fishing boat, Hanoi sent a diplomatic note to the United Nations protesting against Beijing's increasingly revisionist claims in the region. The Foreign Ministry spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang, during the regular press briefing held online on April 9, emphasized that "Vietnam asserts its sovereignty over the Hoang Sa (Paracel) and Truong Sa (Spratly) archipelagos in the East Sea in accordance with international law".<sup>12</sup>

The Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) also issued a statement on April 8, expressing deep concern over the incident. Philippines asserted that the gravity of such events had the potential to genuinely undermine the trust factor between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China. Importantly, the responses mentioned above held considerable significance for shaping the ASEAN's approach towards the dispute and the CoC, as Vietnam remains the chair for ASEAN this year.<sup>13</sup>

What is important to note here is a hardened response by the ASEAN countries while reverberating a regional pushback against China's unilateral claims and assertiveness in the SCS. Indeed, in the purview of the current situation, the strategic mood amongst countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines has shifted towards greater determination to resist aggression and overtly condemn revisionist claims by China.<sup>14</sup> Arguably, continued Chinese assertiveness has the potential to push the ASEAN countries more towards the US.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, that is not to say that ASEAN countries don't acknowledge the risk of military escalation between the American and Chinese naval deployments, which would only drive the strategic situation of the SCS away from peace, stability and prosperity.<sup>16</sup>

## Responses by the Regional Actors

Chinese adventurism in the region in recent months also received diplomatic and military responses from the United States (US) as well as Australia. The US accused China of taking advantage of the COVID-19 outbreak and increase its military activities in the SCS. This has caused tensions between the US and China in the SCS; more so as both the countries have been flexing muscles amidst an intensifying trade war. In this regard, the US conducted live-fire missile tests in the Philippine Sea after China established two new administrative districts.<sup>17</sup> During the drills in waters east of the Philippines, the guided-missile destroyer *USS Barry* launched a medium-

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<sup>12</sup> "The 6<sup>th</sup> Regular Press Conference (9<sup>th</sup> April, 2020)", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vietnam, April 09, 2020 at [http://www.mofahcm.gov.vn/mofa/tt\\_baochi/nr140808202328/ns200414163039](http://www.mofahcm.gov.vn/mofa/tt_baochi/nr140808202328/ns200414163039). (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> S.D. Pradhan, "South China Sea: Vietnam Approaches UN against China", *The Times of India*, April 14, 2020 at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/ChanakyaCode/south-china-sea-vietnam-approaches-un-against-china/> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Nguyễn Quang Dy, "The Growing Risks of Strategic Miscalculation in the South China Sea", *Asialink*, July 24, 2020 at <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/the-growing-risks-of-strategic-miscalculation-in-the-south-china-sea> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Lucio B. Pitlo III, "ASEAN Stops Pulling Punches over South China Sea", *Asia Times*, July 03, 2020 at <https://asiatimes.com/2020/07/asean-stops-pulling-punches-over-south-china-sea/> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Minnie Chan, "US Navy Launches Live-fire Missiles in 'Warning to China'", *South China Morning Post*, March 24, 2020 at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3076768/us-navy-launches-live-fire-missiles-warning-china> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

range Standard Missile-2 which was accompanied by the guided-missile cruiser *USS Shiloh* as a warning to China.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the US Navy, with its amphibious assault ships and the *USS Bunker Hill*, conducted military exercises with the Australian warship *HMAS Parramatta* “in support of security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region”.<sup>19</sup> The US also deployed the *USS Nimitz* and the *USS Ronald Reagan* in response to China’s military activities in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Presumably, the above actions by the US and Australia expressed their growing concerns regarding China’s expansion in the region. This had been evident as the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated: “The United States strongly opposes China’s bullying,” ahead of a virtual meeting between the US and/ the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers in April 2020. He even proclaimed that the US is reducing troops in Europe and deploying them to other places in the Indo-Pacific in light of the actions by China serving as “threats to India, threats to Vietnam, threats to Malaysia, Indonesia and the South China Sea challenge.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, the US, in its press statement titled ‘US Position on Maritime Claims in South China Sea’ went on to state:

“The PRC has no legal grounds to unilaterally impose its will on the region. Beijing has offered no coherent legal basis for its ‘Nine-Dashed Line’ claim in the South China Sea since formally announcing it in 2009.”<sup>22</sup>

At the outset, the document didn’t reflect any substantial change in the US’ position regarding the SCS. However, it was the first instance where the US explicitly endorsed the 2016 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) Tribunal’s decision on the status of SCS claims by the claimant countries. This, importantly, held greater validity in the backdrop of deteriorating US-China relations moving towards confrontation. It was also an expression of support by the US towards its ASEAN allies and partners to counter any unilateral and revisionist claims by China in the SCS region.<sup>23</sup> A firm and proactive approach by the US was thus echoed through the statement which was further established as David Stilwell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia hinted at a possibility of sanctions against China if Beijing continues to demonstrate its revisionist and coercive approach in the SCS.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “U.S. Navy, Royal Australian Navy Team Up in the South China Sea”, US Indo-Pacific Command, April 22, 2020, at <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2160993/us-navy-royal-australian-navy-team-up-in-the-south-china-sea/> (July 10, 2020)

<sup>20</sup> Jack Detsch, “U.S. Carriers Send a Message to Beijing over South China Sea”, *Foreign Policy*, July 09, 2020 at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/09/us-carriers-south-china-sea-sending-message-ronald-reagan-nimitz/> (Accessed on July 10, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> “US Shifting Military to Face Chinese Threat to India, SE Asian Nations: Pompeo”, *The Economic Times*, June 26, 2020 at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-shifting-military-to-face-chinese-threat-to-india-southeast-asian-nations-pompeo/articleshow/76633025.cms> (Accessed on July 12, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> “US Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea”, US Department of State, July 13, 2020, at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/> (Accessed on July 22, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Robert D. Williams, “What did the US Accomplish with its South China Sea Legal Statement?”, Brookings, July 22, 2020 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/07/22/what-did-the-us-accomplish-with-its-south-china-sea-legal-statement/> (Accessed on July 22, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Humeyra Pamuk, David Brunnstrom, “US Says Room for Sanctions in Response to China in South China Sea”, *Reuters*, July 14, 2020 at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-southchinasea-stilwell/us-says-room-for-sanctions-in-response-to-china-in-south-china-sea-idUSKCN24F1TB> (Accessed on July 22, 2020).

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Australia too, in its letter to the United Nations on July 23, 2020, rejected China's claims to the disputed islands, calling them "inconsistent with international law".<sup>25</sup> Canberra's position was further established firmly in the US-Australia joint statement released on July 28, 2020 as both the countries negated China's historic claims and condemned any activity which prejudiced the rights or interests of states under the international law or undermined the existing regional architecture.<sup>26</sup> This, if anything, signified protest by the US and Australia against China's growing aggression in the region.

In view of the above scenario, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, in his 2020 Defence Strategic Update, described the Indo-Pacific as the "epicentre of rising strategic competition."<sup>27</sup> Morrison also emphasized the risk of miscalculation amidst a possibility of a conflict which has been heightening. This explained Canberra's commitment towards raising the Australian defence budget spending above the 2 per cent GDP benchmark as a response to its cautious perceptions of China and the latter's provocative military actions in the SCS region, and largely in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, it can be argued that, the US and Australia's military and diplomatic moves reflected their resolve to play a greater role in the SCS to offset China's aggressively revisionist policies.

## Future Scenario

As China's military posture in the SCS has become more aggressive to achieve its strategic objectives with an increase in US' correspondent military exercises, the risk of a military confrontation is on the rise. To some extent, China's military activism in the SCS amidst the pandemic reverberates the priority for Beijing to endure its military posture and build up its capabilities in the region to sustain its sovereignty claims. However, at the least, China's military adventurism in the region reflects the conceptual underpinnings of its central desire to attain the Chinese dream of rejuvenation.<sup>29</sup> Hence, even as Beijing witnesses a virus outbreak and an economic slowdown, it cannot be distracted from achieving its core strategic interests of sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>30</sup> China, under the current leadership, remains undeterred to strengthen its PLA Army, Navy, and Air Force. At the same time, it remains persistent in modernizing and bolstering the PLA as a world-class force and limit the growing presence of the US and its allies in the regions in which it claims sovereignty.

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<sup>25</sup> "Australia- the United Nations", the United Nations, July 23, 2020, at [https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs\\_new/submissions\\_files/mys\\_12\\_12\\_2019/2020\\_07\\_23\\_AUS\\_NV\\_UN\\_001\\_OLA-2020-00373.pdf](https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mys_12_12_2019/2020_07_23_AUS_NV_UN_001_OLA-2020-00373.pdf) (Accessed on August 03, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> "Joint Statement on Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2020", US Department of State, July 28, 2020, at <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-australia-u-s-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2020/> (Accessed on August 03, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Prime Minister of Australia Scott Morrison, "Address – Launch of the 2020 Defence Strategic Update", Government of Australia, July 01, 2020 at <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-launch-2020-defence-strategic-update> (Accessed on July 12, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Jade Macmillan and Andrew Greene, "Australia to Spend \$270b Building Larger Military to Prepare for 'Poorer, More Dangerous' World and Rise of China", ABC News, June 30, 2020 at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-30/australia-unveils-10-year-defence-strategy/12408232> (Accessed on July 12, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Mark J. Valencia, "As the World Focuses on COVID-19, is China Exploiting the Distraction in the South China Sea? Only If You Believe US Propaganda", *South China Morning Post*, April 27, 2020 at <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3081472/world-focuses-covid-19-china-exploiting-distraction-south-china-sea> (Accessed on April 20, 2020); Joshua Kurlantzick, "COVID-19 and the South China Sea", Council on Foreign Relations, April 22, 2020 at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/covid-19-and-south-china-sea> (Accessed on July 12, 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Zhang Zhihao, "PLA Slams Naval Drills in South China Sea", *China Daily*, May 01, 2020 at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202005/01/WS5eab62dca310a8b2411530ee.html> (Accessed July 12, 2020).

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Nevertheless, with a toughened approach by the US and Australia, coupled with the strong responses by countries claiming sovereignty, the possibility of the SCS region to remain a hotbed of power projections and power rivalry cannot be disputed. An increasingly tense situation in the region could also raise the risk of miscalculation, particularly with the US and China enhancing their military involvement. This could, in turn, lead to a conflict between both countries in the SCS if the risks are not mitigated through diplomatic initiatives and stronger deterrent postures.

# MAPPING EAST ASIA

## CHINA

### PLA's Anti-Epidemic Military Diplomacy

- China has sent medical supplies and equipment to Vietnam at the request of the latter's military. These include nuclei acid testing kits, body temperature monitoring equipment etc.<sup>1</sup> The PLA has also sent a team of medical personnel to the Defence Services General Hospital at Mingaladon in Myanmar and donated medical supplies in its fight against the coronavirus.<sup>2</sup> China had already sent a team for joint consultations with the Myanmar authorities. Moreover, the testing kits were donated to Myanmar along with expertise on preventive measures on the pandemic, laboratory diagnostics with respect to COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, its military diplomacy was one of the areas on which the Chinese PLA concentrated its efforts. There were also many video-conferences with Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Africa and Ukraine, where the Chinese military interacted with the militaries of other countries.<sup>4</sup>

### Chinese Military Drills in High-Plateau Regions

- The PLA held infiltration exercises in Tibet, in particular in Tanggula Mountains, where it tested the troops' ability to operate in extreme and complicated situations and conditions and to test new equipment.<sup>5</sup> These exercises also tested the PLA's capability to avoid reconnaissance by enemy drones and launching an attack against a hostile command centre by infiltrating beyond enemy lines, considered as a tactic to win the conflict, in the exercise. The PLA paratroopers also held these tactical exercises and the integrated infantry battalion alongside armoured vehicles, engineering troops and scouts were engaged in exercises that reflected actual combat conditions.<sup>6</sup> These high-manoeuve operations showcased China's deployment of border forces and the military-civilian integration in logistics that would help in the quick mobilisation of forces and efficiency in organising large-scale troop movement.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Xinhua, "PLA Donates Anti-Epidemic Supplies to Vietnamese Military", April 29, 2020 at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/29/c\\_139018243.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/29/c_139018243.htm), (Accessed on April 15, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Xinhua, "Chinese Military Medical Personnel Arrive in Myanmar to Assist in Covid-19 Fight", April 24, 2020 at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/24/c\\_139005192.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/24/c_139005192.htm) (Accessed on April 15, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Xinhua, "China Donates Medical Equipment, Accessories to Myanmar's COVID-19 Testing Laboratory", May 4, 2020 at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/04/c\\_139030148.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/04/c_139030148.htm) (Accessed on May 15, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Xinhua, "PLA Shares Experience in COVID-19 Fight with Militaries from Multiple Countries", May 17, 2020 at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/17/c\\_139062692.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/17/c_139062692.htm) (Accessed on June 15, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Teddy Ng and Minnie Chan, "PLA Holds High Altitude Exercise as India-China Border Tensions Continue", *South China Morning Post*, June 3, 2020 at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3087313/pla-holds-high-altitude-exercise-china-india-border-tensions> (Accessed on June 15, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Dave Makichuk, "China Sends Message to India with PLA Desert Drills", June 9, 2020, *Asia Times* at <https://asiatimes.com/2020/06/china-sends-message-to-india-with-pla-desert-drills/> (Accessed on June 15, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Liu Xuanzun, "PLA Conducts Maneuvers in High-Altitude NW China amid Border Tensions with India", *Global Times*, June 7, 2020, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1190806.shtml> (Accessed on June 15, 2020).

## Border Tensions along the India-China LAC

- Indian and the Chinese troops were involved in border clash in hand-to-hand combat in the Naku La sector, which injured troops on both sides. The Indian Army Eastern Command spokesperson commented that the incident was caused by aggressive behaviour from both sides and fist fights ensued from arguments involving both sides.<sup>8</sup> However, the issue was resolved at the commander level talks on the ground. Both India and China have been amassing troops along the LAC after face-offs at the border. On May 5, troops from both sides also clashed in Pangong Tso Lake with iron rods and stones were pelted and troops on both sides were injured.<sup>9</sup> Later, troops from both sides had collected on the lake and in other areas along the LAC. The mobilisation along the border made border talks very important for both countries. On June 5, 2020, both sides initiated talks concerning the stand-off and the de-escalation measures that were to be taken. The talks were led by Corps Commander Lt. Gen. Harinder Singh and Major Gen Liu Lin, the Commander of the Xinjiang military region, as the Major-General level talks that were conducted on June 2, 2020 were inconclusive.<sup>10</sup> Later, many other rounds of talks were conducted at the local levels as a follow-up to the Corps Commander-level talks on June 5, 2020, and it was agreed at that time that both sides would disengage.<sup>11</sup>

## Chinese Recruitment Drive in 2020

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, China had suspended its recruitment drive around the country to control the spread of the virus. After the pandemic receded, the PLA has started the recruitment for the second half of the year 2020. The State Council and the CMC had approved the recruitment for the second half, which will end in August 15, 2020.<sup>12</sup> This year, the Chinese military has given more emphasis on recruiting more young graduates, as China seeks to modernise its combat capability. There have been a series of incentives that have been offered to encourage more graduates to apply for the military, such as further studies in post-graduate programmes, priority for students involved in mitigation of the effects of COVID-19 and those who have applied for post-graduate programmes.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Associated Press, “Chinese, Indian Soldiers Wounded in High-Altitude at Border near Tibet”, *South China Morning Post*, May 10, 2020 at <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/3083723/chinese-indian-soldiers-wounded-high-altitude-clash-border> (Accessed on May 15, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Press Trust of India, “India, China Enhance Military Presence around Pangong Tso Lake and Galwan Valley in Ladakh as Tensions Mount”, *First Post*, May 21, 2020 at <https://www.firstpost.com/india/india-china-enhance-military-presence-around-pangong-tso-lake-and-galwan-valley-in-ladakh-as-tensions-mount-8389461.html> (Accessed on June 15, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> “India Demands China to Remove Its Troops, Structures from Pangong Lake”, *National Herald*, June 6, 2020 at <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/national/india-demands-china-to-remove-its-troops-structures-from-pangong-lake> (Accessed on June 15, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Vishnu Som, “Entire Situation along Border with China under Control: Army Chief”, NDTV News, June 13, 2020 at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/entire-situation-along-our-borders-with-china-is-under-control-says-army-chief-general-mm-naravane-news-agency-ani-2245623> (Accessed on June 15, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Xinhua, “China Starts 2020 H2 Military Recruiting”, *People’s Daily*, May 1, 2020 at <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0501/c90000-9686273.html> (Accessed on May 9, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> “Military to Recruit More College Grads”, *China Daily*, June 4, 2020 at <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0604/c90000-9697630.html> (Accessed on June 15, 2020).

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## The Rationale of Delivering Aid by Chinese PLA during COVID-19

- Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Chinese PLA continues to pursue its strategy of strengthening international cooperation with national defence departments and the militaries of other countries to contain the pandemic. For instance, the Chinese PLA, after approval by the China Central Military Commission (CMC) on June 13, 2020 delivered COVID-19 prevention and control supplies including protective clothing and surgical masks to the armed forces of six countries on request – Belarus, Serbia, Hungary, Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Trinidad & Tobago.<sup>14</sup> Also, on June 16, 2020, the Chinese military medical experts held a video conference with Kuwaiti military officials, where both sides exchanged experiences of combating the pandemic. The Kuwaiti side hailed the important achievements by the Chinese army in the fight against the pandemic.<sup>15</sup>
- Hence, in the wake of the Chinese providing aid to several countries to fight the novel coronavirus, doubts have been raised whether China seeks economic gains or are there political strings attached. Defending the Chinese endeavour of supplying medical equipment to several countries, the Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, declared that, “When our friends are in trouble, we never sit by and do nothing.” He also stressed that helping other countries in time of the pandemic is not “out of geopolitical calculation, or in pursuit of economic gains, or with any political strings attached.” Wang, further stressed that the only goal for China in providing assistance, “is to save as many lives as possible” in which China has believes that “one country’s success does not mean the end of the global pandemic. It is only when the virus is defeated in all countries can we claim a true victory.”<sup>16</sup>

## Aid and Assistance to African Countries during COVID-19 Pandemic

- Following the outbreak of COVID-19, several media and experts have raised questions about China-Africa bilateral relations, especially when Beijing failed to respond resolutely to the incidents of racism and discrimination of Africans in Guangzhou. Nevertheless, the fight against the coronavirus has only strengthened ties between China and the African countries. The Chinese Embassy to the Republic of Congo handed over anti-pandemic medical supplies to Congo on June 5, donated by China’s Ministry of National Defence. Expressing gratitude to China, the Congolese Minister of National Defence Charles Richard Mondjo stated that the aid supplies by the Chinese Ministry of National Defence “fully demonstrated the friendly cooperation and profound friendship between the two countries and the two militaries.”<sup>17</sup>
- The China Ministry of National Defence also donated 62,000 masks, 19,000 pieces of personal protective equipment and other critical medical supplies to the Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF). Appreciating the Chinese Defence Ministry in supplying medical equipment, Zimbabwe’s Minister for Defence, Oppah

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<sup>14</sup> “Chinese PLA Provides Epidemic Prevention Supplies for Militaries of 6 Countries”, *China Military*, June 16, 2020 at [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-06/16/content\\_9835600.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-06/16/content_9835600.htm) (Accessed on June 18, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> “Chinese, Kuwaiti Military Medical Experts Exchange Experiences in Fighting COVID-19”, *China Military*, June 17, 2020 at [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-06/17/content\\_9836528.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-06/17/content_9836528.htm) (Accessed on June 18, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> “China Pursues No Geopolitical Goals in Aid to Global Anti-pandemic Fight”, *Forum on China-Africa Cooperation*, May 25, 2020 at <https://www.focac.org/eng/ttxsyt/1782254.htm> (Accessed on June 16, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> “Chinese Military Donates Anti-pandemic Medical Supplies to Republic of Congo”, *China Military*, June 15, 2020 at [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-06/08/content\\_9830099.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-06/08/content_9830099.htm) (Accessed on June 17, 2020).

Muchinguri affirmed that “epidemic prevention equipment would help protect ZDF troops working during the lockdown to maintain law and order and enforce regulations.”<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the Chinese Ambassador to Zimbabwe, Guo Shaochun, reiterated that “the two militaries have maintained robust relations between their leaders and continuously strengthen cooperation and mutual support in training, medical services and military education.”<sup>19</sup>

- Further strengthening ties with African countries, Chinese President Xi Jinping on June 17, 2020 chaired the ‘Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity against COVID’ in Beijing. Several African leaders, including the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Director General of the WHO attended the meeting held via video link. Subsequently, in a joint statement, the African members and the Chinese emphasized “the importance of public health issues to global peace and security” and committed in “extending mutual support on issues regarding each other’s core interests and major concern[s]” in accordance with the FOCAC. The joint statement also declared that “the African side supports China’s position on Taiwan and Hong Kong and support[s] China’s effort to safeguard national security in Hong Kong in accordance with law.”<sup>20</sup>
- In fact, appraising China-African relations during ongoing pandemic, an editorial in *Xinhua* opines, “these past several months have let the African people see more clearly the true meaning and value of their fraternity with the Chinese people.” And “as they continue to fight this deadly virus, they keep counting on China as their most trustworthy partner in this age of uncertainty.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Southeast Asian Leaders Call for “Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN”**

- ASEAN member states under the chairmanship of Vietnam released a joint statement on June 26, 2020, that called for a “cohesive and responsive ASEAN” to deal with issues concerning the bloc by “rising above challenges”. While there were many crucial points made, what was notable — and also timely — was the ASEAN leaders’ reaffirmation of “maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, safety and freedom of navigation and over-flight above the South China Sea (SCS)”. While the bloc again called for finalising the negotiations related to the Code of Conduct in the SCS as agreed in 2002, the bloc also made it clear that any code reached must be “consistent with international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS”. In 2016, China has rejected the South China Sea arbitration judgement — which was delivered based on UNCLOS — by the Permanent Court of Arbitration that ruled in favour of the Philippines. Also, the ASEAN statement is interesting considering its timing, as China in the past few months— especially during the pandemic— upped the ante and has been militarily aggressive in the SCS.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Zimbabwe Hails Medical Donation by Chinese Army”, *China Military*, June 8, 2020 at [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-06/08/content\\_9830181.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-06/08/content_9830181.htm) (Accessed on June 17, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> “Zimbabwe Hails Medical Donation by Chinese Army”, *China Military*, June 8, 2020 at [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-06/08/content\\_9830181.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-06/08/content_9830181.htm) (Accessed on June 17, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> “Joint Statement of the Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19”, Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, June 18, 2020 at <https://www.focac.org/eng/ttxsyt/1789712.htm> (Accessed on June 19, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> “Opinion: Pandemic fight only to Solidify China-African Brotherhood”, *Xinhua*, June 17, 2020 at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/17/c\\_139145650.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/17/c_139145650.htm) (Accessed on June, 18, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> “ASEAN Leaders’ Vision Statement on a Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN: Rising above Challenges and Sustaining Growth”, *ASEAN 2020*, June 26, 2020 at [https://www.asean2020.vn/xem-chi-tiet1/-/asset\\_publisher/ynfWm23dDfpd/content/asean-leaders-vision-statement-on-a-cohesive-and-responsive-asean-rising-above-challenges-and-sustaining-growth](https://www.asean2020.vn/xem-chi-tiet1/-/asset_publisher/ynfWm23dDfpd/content/asean-leaders-vision-statement-on-a-cohesive-and-responsive-asean-rising-above-challenges-and-sustaining-growth) (Accessed on June 29, 2020).

## US Deploys Three Aircraft Carriers to SCS

- The US Navy for the first time since 2017 has deployed three aircraft carriers to the SCS amidst growing concerns of intensifying geopolitical rivalry between the US and China, and increasing militarization of the SCS and the ECS. While “USS *Theodore Roosevelt* and USS *Nimitz* carrier strike groups” have been conducting “dual carrier flight operations in the Philippine Sea”, USS *Ronald Reagan* with its strike group was “conducting operations in the Philippine Sea”. This comes on the back of the PLA’s increasing aggressive tendencies in the SCS. For instance, in the second week of June 2020, Vietnam charged two Chinese ships of attacking “a Vietnamese fishing boat in the South China Sea and [seizing] its catch and equipment.” This is one among many such reported acts of the Chinese PLA’s militarized actions in the region. Therefore, the presence of three US aircraft carriers assumes importance and indicates a tense future for the region.<sup>23</sup>

## THE TAIWAN STRAIT

### Grey Zone Conflict

- William Chung, a scholar at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR), published an article titled, “The Cross-Strait Grey Zone Conflict and Taiwan’s Security”, in the INDSR’s *Defense Situation*, in June. In the article, he observed, as the news reported, that Taiwan faced “increased threats from Beijing through the expanded deployment of ‘grey zone conflict’ tactics.” The news reported him observing that China “wants to apply “extreme pressure” on Taiwan through non-peaceful means that are short of a conventional war. “Chinese fishing boats intentionally ramming a Taiwanese Coast Guard vessel” in March and the activities of Chinese warships and aircraft “near Taiwan’s air space and waters in recent years” were listed as examples in the article.<sup>24</sup>
- In June, PLA fighter jets made multiple intrusions in Taiwan’s southwest air defence identification zone (ADIZ). These included Y-8 transport planes and Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jets. Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defence (MND), however, maintained, “There was no cause for alarm, as it was closely monitoring the airspace and waters around Taiwan.” According to it, Taiwanese patrol planes chased off the intruding Chinese air force planes.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Jesse Johnson, “Three US Aircraft Carriers Operating on Doorstep of South China Sea”, *The Japan Times*, June 21, 2020 at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/06/21/asia-pacific/three-us-aircraft-carriers-south-china-sea/#.Xv1bAigzbIV> (Accessed on June 29, 2020); “China ships attack Vietnam boat in South China Sea”, *NHK World-Japan*, June 14, 2020 at [https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200614\\_20/](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200614_20/) (Accessed on June 29, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Emerson Lim, “Taiwan Faces Increased “Grey Zone Conflict” Threat: Scholar”, *Focus Taiwan*, June 08, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202006080014> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> “China Fighter Jet Enters Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone”, *Focus Taiwan*, June 16, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202006160024> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

- On April 23, the MND released a surveillance photograph, taken by Taiwan's Air Force, of the Chinese aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, when was sailing in waters south of Taiwan. The black-and-white photo, first time taken or released by Taiwan showed “an aerial view of the *Liaoning*” when it “escorted by two destroyers, two frigates and a supply ship”, “passed through the Bashi Channel, a waterway to the south of Taiwan...and was heading toward[s] waters east of the island.” However, “nothing out of the ordinary was observed.” It was “the second time in April [that] the aircraft [and] “its five escorting vessels passed through the Miyako Strait south of Japan and east of Taiwan” on April 12.<sup>26</sup>

## The US Military Signalling

- In early June, a US Navy aircraft, “on a routine logistics flight from the Kadena air base in Japan to Thailand... was re-routed by Taiwan to avoid “an exercise on its east coast.”. The aircraft (C-40A) “entered Taiwan air space with permission, though it did not land at any Taiwan airports.” However, China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) took strong exception to the incident and termed it as harmful to “sovereignty, security and development rights [of China], and contravened international law and the basic norms of international relations”. TAO termed the incident as “an illegal act and a seriously provocative incident.”<sup>27</sup>
- On June 4, the US warship, an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, the *USS Russell* (DDG-59), sailed through the Taiwan Strait. The sailing coincided with the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre in China. Seven US naval ships, including this one, have transited through the Taiwan Strait in 2020 thus far. They sailed through the Strait nine times in 2019. The US Navy was reported to have resumed – after a long gap– sending warships to transit through the Strait in July 2018 when the DDG-59 charted waters in the Strait.<sup>28</sup>
- During the months under review, earlier on May 13, the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer *USS McCampbell* passed through the Strait in a southerly direction, which was the sixth transiting by a US naval ship through the Taiwan Strait this year.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the *USS Barry*, an Arleigh-Burke class guided-missile destroyer, had transited through the waters on April 23.<sup>30</sup>
- In April, the US reconnaissance military aircraft were seen a total 13 times near Taiwan. It was an American EP-3E electronic warfare and reconnaissance aircraft that “flew southwest of Taiwan” for the thirteenth time on April 30. Interestingly, the US “plane had [reportedly] its transponder switched on, allowing itself to be detected by aircraft tracking sites such as Aircraft Spots.” Incidentally, Taiwan's MND did not confirm the

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<sup>26</sup> Matt Yu and Joseph Yeh, “Military Releases Surveillance Photo of Liaoning Aircraft Carrier”, *Focus Taiwan*, April 23, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202004230016> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Beijing Newsroom and Ben Blanchard, “China Condemns ‘Provocative’ US Military Flight over Taiwan”, *Reuters*, June 11, 2020 at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-usa-taiwan/china-condemns-provocative-u-s-military-flight-over-taiwan-idUSKBN2311E0> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Matt Yu and Elizabeth Hsu, “US Destroyer Transits Taiwan Strait on June 4”, *Focus Taiwan*, June 05, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202006050003> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Matt Yu and Emerson Lim, “US Warship Transits Taiwan Strait; Sixth This Year”, *Focus Taiwan*, May 14, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202005140006> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>30</sup> “US Warship Transits through Taiwan Strait”, *Focus Taiwan*, April 24, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202004240004> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

news. The report supposedly came from “a military air movement tracker.” Apart from the EP-3E, RC-135U Combat Sent and P-3 Orion anti-submarine and maritime surveillance aircraft were spotted on earlier occasions.<sup>31</sup>

## TAIWAN

### Gaze on Contacts with the Mainland

- After the case of Chang Ching-yi, a Taiwanese based in Washington, D.C. where he works for Shanghai-based Dragon TV came into light during a White House news conference on April 8, Chiu Chui-cheng, Deputy Minister in the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), stated that “any Taiwanese citizens who work for Chinese organizations linked to the CPC administrative or military authorities are in violation of the Act Governing Relations Between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area.” He informed that as per the March 2004 decree of the government, “Chinese political or military authorities” refer to enterprises, institutions and groups belonging to all levels of [the] CPC and government agencies in China.” He further informed that under the Act, “Taiwanese people, institutions or groups found guilty of contravening the [A]ct will face fines of between NT\$100,000 and NT\$500,000 (US\$16,620).” The reporter was to be questioned and to provide an explanation under the law, as Chang’s employer Dragon TV was part of the Shanghai Media Group, an affiliate of the CPC’s Shanghai chapter and the Shanghai city government. The Taiwanese people are otherwise “free to choose...work in China, as long as [they] [do] not pose a threat to Taiwan’s national security and interests.”<sup>32</sup>

### Media Operations under Radar

- A legislation is proposed “to prevent Chinese media outlets from exploiting a legal loophole to illegally operate over-the-top (OTT) services in Taiwan.” Executive Yuan spokeswoman Kolas Yotaka issued a statement to this effect, “amid reports that China Central Television (CCTV) could soon begin services in the nation.” Actually, *Liberty Times* had reported that “CCTV plans to follow the model of Chinese OTT service providers, iQiyi and Tencent Video, and begin operations in Taiwan.” It also stated that “the companies have been able to skirt a rule banning Chinese OTT service providers from operating in Taiwan without permission by contracting local distributors and platform providers.”<sup>33</sup>

### Taiwan’s Response to the Situation in Hong Kong

- In response to China’s new national security law for Hong Kong, the Taiwan government is working on a Hong Kong humanitarian assistance action plan, which has passed a review by the Executive Yuan today. The plan includes shelter and other forms of assistance for the asylum seekers from Hong Kong. Government

<sup>31</sup> Matt Yu and Emerson Lim, “US Spy Plane Spotted Southwest of Taiwan”, *Focus Taiwan*, April 30, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202004300017> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Flor Wang and Lai Yen-his, “Taiwan Warns against Nationals Working for CPC-affiliated Agencies”, *Focus Taiwan*, April 17, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202004170018> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Sean Lin and Shelley Shan, “Legislation Planned on Chinese OTT Services”, *Taipei Times*, April 24, 2020 at <https://taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2020/04/24/2003735197> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

agencies, such as the ministries of the interior, the health and welfare, labour, education and justice, the National Security Bureau and the Investigation Bureau, are working on the plan, which was drafted by the Mainland Affairs Council. It is being prepared in accordance with Article 18 of the Act Governing Relations with Hong Kong and Macau, which provisions for assistance to residents of Hong Kong and Macau, “who are suffering political persecution.”<sup>34</sup>

- Incidentally, the National Immigration Agency (NIA) released data that “a total of 5,858 people from Hong Kong obtained “[resident] permits to reside in Taiwan last year, up from 4,148 the previous year”, registering an increase of 40 per cent from 2018. Similarly, “the number of Hong Kongers who secured Taiwan identification cards also rose to 1,474 last year from 1,090 a year earlier. Since “in the first four months of this year, [only] a total of 474” out of 5,858 people “received residence permits”, the increase can be attributed to political situation in Hong Kong that has fast deteriorated June 2019 onwards.<sup>35</sup>
- Further, President Tsai Ing-wen signalled that in view of China’s planned national security law (which has been passed and ratified as an Act since then), that it may “revoke the special status it extends to Hong Kong... a move that could anger Beijing and make it harder for Hong Kongers to visit and invest” in Taiwan.<sup>36</sup> However, the opposition parties — the Kuomintang (KMT), the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) and New Power Party (NPP) — argued that “instead of suspending the act that gives preferential treatment to Hong Kong, the government should amend it, making it easier for Hong Kongers to seek asylum in Taiwan if the situation in their territory worsens.”<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, “in a rare joint statement, the major parties in the Legislature said China’s decision to enact the law was putting Hong Kong’s autonomy in jeopardy, and they asked the Taiwan government to provide assistance to Hong Kong residents, in accordance with the Act Governing Relations with Hong Kong and Macau.”<sup>38</sup>

## US Support for Taiwan

- Senator Josh Hawley introduced a bill titled the Taiwan Defense Act (TDA), to ensure American armed forces’ “ability to fend off any invasion of Taiwan by China.” Hawley stated, “The TDA requires the Department of Defense to maintain the ability to defeat a Chinese invasion – and in particular, a Chinese *fait accompli* – against Taiwan and to report regularly on its progress toward this goal.” He described Taiwan as the

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<sup>34</sup> Chung Li-hua and William Hetherington, “HK Asylum Seekers Aid Plan Includes Shelter”, *Taipei Times*, June 11, 2020 at <https://taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/06/11/2003738037> (Accessed August 02, 2020); Chung Li-hua, “Executive Yuan Finalizing HK Assistance Action Plan”, *Taipei Times*, June 08, 2020 at <https://taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/06/08/2003737850> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Wang Cheng-chung and Frances Huang, “Over 5,000 Hong Kongers Granted Permits to Reside in Taiwan in 2019”, *Focus Taiwan*, May 23, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202005230015> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Yimou Lee and Ben Blanchard, “Taiwan Considers Revoking Hong Kong’s Special Status on Law Fears”, *Reuters*, May 25, 2020 at <https://in.reuters.com/article/hongkong-protests-taiwan/taiwan-considers-revoking-hong-kongs-special-status-on-law-fears-idINKBN231049> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> “Opposition Criticizes Tsai’s Proposed Suspension of Hong Kong Act”, *Focus Taiwan*, May 25, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202005250018> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> “Taiwan’s Legislature Condemns China Law, Promotes Help for Hong Kongers”, *Focus Taiwan*, May 29, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202005290004> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

“lynchpin of a free and open Indo-Pacific.”<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, “the US government has notified Congress of a possible sale of advanced torpedoes to Taiwan.” The possible sale is “worth around \$180 million.”<sup>40</sup>

## Taiwan Invited to RIMPAC as Chinese Incursions into Taipei’s Airspace Continue

- The US Senate Committee on Armed Services has proposed in the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)’s draft to include Taiwan in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) Exercise — also known to be the largest naval games — instead of China. Though China participated in past exercises, it was not included in the 2018 edition, thereby, leading to the conclusion that Taiwan may be its natural replacement. However, it is not yet clear if Taiwan will be included in this year’s edition. Taiwanese media reported that if invited, Taiwan’s initial inclusion in RIMPAC this year may only be as an observer. Taiwan’s inclusion comes amidst heated geopolitical rivalry between the US and China and the PLA’s repeated transgressions of Taiwanese airspace. On June 17, 2020, Reuters reported that Chinese aircraft intruded Taiwan four times in nine days leading up to the reporting day.<sup>41</sup>

## JAPAN

### Japan Drafts the Annual Defence White Paper

- Japanese media reports<sup>42</sup> suggest that the defence ministry in its draft White Paper has underscored concerns regarding intensifying great power competition amidst a pandemic. It indicates that Chinese attempts to reshape the international order to Beijing’s advantage will be more pronounced and thus there is a need to weigh likely threats to national security. It stressed that several countries are preoccupied with managing the impact of COVID-19 and have mobilised armed forces to deal with the virus outbreak. Meanwhile, China has continued to increase their activities near Japan in an attempt to alter the status quo in the East China Sea, and also the South China Sea. They have bolstered their operational capabilities to manoeuvre in distant areas. In earlier months, Japan has registered protests with the Chinese leadership against several Chinese incursions into territorial waters near the contested Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Additionally, the draft White Paper also stresses the challenge posed to Japan’s national security by North Korea. It highlights

<sup>39</sup> Chiang Chin-yeh and Elizabeth Hsu, “US Senator Introduces New Taiwan Defense Bill”, *Focus Taiwan*, June 12, 2020 at <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202006120010> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Ben Blanchard and Cate Cadell, “US to Sell Taiwan \$180 Million of Torpedoes, Angering China”, *Reuters*, May 21, 2020 at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-usa-security/u-s-to-sell-taiwan-180-million-of-torpedoes-angering-china-idUSKBN22X01N> (Accessed August 02, 2020).

<sup>41</sup> Tom O’Connor, “US Act May See Taiwan Replace China at World’s Largest Naval Games”, *Newsweek*, June 26, 2020 at <https://www.newsweek.com/us-act-may-see-taiwan-replace-china-worlds-largest-naval-games-1513766> (Accessed on June 29, 2020); Matthew Strong, “Taiwan could First Attend RIMPAC Maritime Exercise as Observer”, *Taiwan News*, June 27, 2020 at <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3955033> (Accessed on June 29, 2020); Reuters, “Taiwan Warns off Intruding Chinese Aircraft for 4th Time in Nine days”, Thomson Reuters Foundation News, June 17, 2020 at <https://news.trust.org/item/20200617101441-ladmg/> (Accessed on June 29, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> “Defense Report Warns about Security Challenges”, NHK, May 21, 2020 at [https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200521\\_13/](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200521_13/) (Accessed on June 20, 2020).

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that the short range ballistic missiles launched last year have flown at a lower orbit than conventional missiles, implying that it can circumvent defence networks. The Annual White Paper is scheduled to be released in July.

### Japan Suspends Aegis Ashore Deployment

- Japan has decided to suspend the deployment of the Aegis Ashore land-based missile defence system and the Defence Ministry and the National Security Council (NSC) are reportedly exploring options. The authorities have cited technical issues and cost-related challenges behind such a pronouncement. The NSC is likely to make an official pronouncement of withdrawing the plan to deploy the Aegis Ashore in the Akita and Yamaguchi prefectures in the near future. Subsequently, Japan may have to revisit the current National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) and the Medium-Term Defense Program (MTDP) of 2018.<sup>43</sup> Japan's decision to halt the deployment of the Aegis Ashore missile defence system may diminish its ability to manage the North Korean challenge and may also impact the US-Japan security alliance.

### Ishigaki Alters Area Designation of Senkaku

- The Ishigaki Municipal Assembly in Okinawa has given a new name to the administrative area that comprises the contested Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.<sup>44</sup> These disputed islands come under the jurisdiction of Ishigaki city. Presently, Tonoshiro is the administrative title for the islands and from October, it will be transformed to Tonoshiro Senkaku. The authorities explained that the change is being made to escape administrative and procedural errors since one other place in Ishigaki city is also called Tonoshiro.<sup>45</sup> This has sparked a response from China, who also claims these disputed Islands.

### Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement

- Following six years of negotiations, Japan and Australia have finalised the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA). The RAA will need ratification in the Diet. Reports suggest that it is expected to be signed at the Japan-Australia summit scheduled for July. The agreement encompasses provisions necessary for the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to operate in Australia, and for the Australian defence force to operate around Japan. The mutuality of the RAA is important and it reportedly encompasses taxation, basing, entry and exit procedures, and criminal jurisdiction. The objective remains to augment the bilateral partnership in the face of more and more assertive Chinese behaviour.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Yukio Tajima, "Aegis Ashore Suspension Stretches Japan's Defenses Dangerously Thin", *Nikkei Asian Review*, June 17, 2020 at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Aerospace-Defense/Aegis-Ashore-suspension-stretches-japan-s-defenses-dangerously-thin> (Accessed on June 20, 2020).

<sup>44</sup> "Ishigaki Renames Area Containing Senkaku Islands, Prompting Backlash Fears", *Kyodo*, June 22, 2020 at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/06/22/national/ishigaki-senkaku-renaming/#.XvBi2kUzbIU> (Accessed on June 20, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> "Okinawan City Changes Area Designation of Senkaku", NHK, June 22, 2020 at [https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200622\\_16/](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200622_16/) (Accessed on June 20, 2020).

<sup>46</sup> "Japan and Australia on Track for Status of Forces Pact in July, Sources Say", JIJI Press, June 10, 2020 at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/06/10/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-australia-forces-pact/#.XvCcAEUzbIU> (Accessed on June 20, 2020).

## Chinese Submarine Spotted in Japan's Contiguous Waters

- Defence authorities indicated that a Chinese submarine sailed without surfacing in the contiguous zone northeast of the Amami-Oshima Island in the Kagoshima prefecture.<sup>47</sup> It was reportedly spotted by Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyers and patrol planes.<sup>48</sup> The Chinese submarine reportedly sailed west through the East China Sea. Japanese authorities confirmed that the submarine refrained from entering Japan's territorial waters. Japanese defence officials are gathering information and strengthening surveillance. This is the first instance since 2018 when a Chinese nuclear-powered submarine was detected around the Miyako Island besides the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.

## Japan and COVID-19

- Prime Minister Abe has lifted emergency from all parts of Japan following consultations with the advisory panel before the scheduled date of May 31, 2020. This move was essentially influenced by the urgent need to rescue the economy. Japan did succeed in keeping the casualties from COVID-19 comparatively lower than other countries such as the US and Europe. It has also succeeded in bringing down the positive cases of coronavirus to government-determined targets for reopening. Japan has demonstrated the capacity to flatten the curve and ease the emergency in about a month and a half. The Prime Minister has lauded the "Japanese model". Meanwhile, Japan has injected the second supplementary budget, and the first and second package to support recovery together amounts to ¥200 trillion, which is around 40 per cent of the GDP.<sup>49</sup>

## G-7 Issues "Grave Concern" on Hong Kong

- The Foreign Ministers of Japan, the US, the UK, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and the High Representative of the EU highlighted "grave concern regarding China's decision to impose a national security law on Hong Kong".<sup>50</sup>
- They stressed that "China's decision is not in conformity with the Hong Kong Basic Law and its international commitments under the principles of the legally binding, UN-registered Sino-British Joint Declaration. The proposed national security law would risk seriously undermining the "One Country, Two Systems" principle and the territory's high degree of autonomy".<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, it was suggested that it "would jeopardize the system which has allowed Hong Kong to flourish and made it a success over many years". It encouraged free debate amongst the stakeholders. Concerns over the sustainability of fundamental rights, the rule of law and an independent judiciary were flagged.

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<sup>47</sup> "Foreign Submarine Seen in Japan's Contiguous Zone", NHK, June 20, 2020 at [https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200620\\_17/](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200620_17/) (Accessed on June 20, 2020).

<sup>48</sup> "Japan Detects Apparent Chinese Submarine Travelling near Amami-Oshima Island", Kyodo, June 21, 2020 at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/06/21/national/japan-detects-foreign-submarine-amami-oshima/#.XvBbsEUzbIU> (Accessed on June 20, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> Satoshi Sugiyama, "Japan Cautiously Lifts Last of Virus Emergency Controls", *The Japan Times*, May 25, 2020 at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/05/25/national/japan-lifts-state-of-emergency-coronavirus/#.XvHslUUzbIU> (Accessed on June 20, 2020).

<sup>50</sup> "G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on Hong Kong", MOFA Japan, June 18, 2020 at [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_002844.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_002844.html) (Accessed on June 20, 2020).

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## THE KOREAN PENINSULA

### Second Anniversary of Trump-Kim Singapore Summit

- June 12 marked the historic second anniversary of US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's Summit hosted in Singapore in 2018. Following that meeting "President Trump committed to provide security guarantees to the DPRK, and Chairman Kim Jong-Un reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula".<sup>52</sup> Even though Chairman Kim during that meeting reaffirmed the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration and committed to the goal of "complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula", the security situation in the Korean Peninsula remains tense. Despite the Singapore Summit and the following Hanoi Summit, discussions to implement the agreement have not made progress owing to gaps regarding the scope of denuclearization and sanctions relief, in addition to the sequencing of these steps.

### Tensions Escalate in Inter-Korea Relations

- On June 16, 2020 North Korea has blasted an inter-Korean joint liaison office in Kaesong in response to a let-down by South Korea in preventing defectors from flying anti-North Korea leaflets. Meanwhile, June 15 marked the 20th anniversary of the South-North Joint Declaration. This incident has led to North Korean threats of undertaking military action. Meanwhile, Seoul voiced strong regret and cautioned Pyongyang not to exacerbate the situation. After a meeting of the National Security Council Seoul stated that this "is an act that breaches the hope of all people wishing for the development of inter-Korean relations and a lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula".<sup>53</sup> South Korea has also indicated that any escalation will be met with a strong response. Meanwhile, the Unification Ministry called it a "senseless" act by North Korea to blow off the joint liaison office. The Unification Minister, Kim Yeon-chul has resigned over the developments in inter-Korea relations.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong-Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit", The White House, June 12, 2018 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/> (Accessed on June 20, 2020).

<sup>53</sup> "N. Korea Blows Up Joint Liaison Office in Kaesong", Yonhap News Agency, June 16, 2020 at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200616008258325> (Accessed on June 20, 2020).

# CONTRIBUTING MEMBERS

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## **DR. PRASHANT KUMAR SINGH**

ASSOCIATE FELLOW

## **DR. M. S. PRATHIBHA**

ASSOCIATE FELLOW

## **DR. TITLI BASU**

ASSOCIATE FELLOW

## **DR. OPANGMEREN JAMIR**

RESEARCH ANALYST

## **ADITYA JAKKI**

INTERN, EAST AISA CENTER

## **MRITTIKA GUHA SARKAR**

RESEARCH SCHOLAR, CENTRE FOR EAST ASIAN STUDIES (CEAS), SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (SIS), JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY, NEW DELHI

We appreciate the support of the Center Coordinator Dr. Jagannath P. Panda.

\* All the footnotes were verified at the time of publication.

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