

# Manila's SCS aggression result of strategic error

By Ma Bo

In recent months, the Philippines has frequently provoked China in the waters surrounding Ren'ai Reef and Huangyan Island, attracting extensive international attention. Will the Philippines take the risk of relying on the support of the US to forcefully transport construction materials and personnel to the illegally "grounded" warship in Ren'ai Reef, thereby triggering an armed conflict between China and the Philippines?

Although it has not been ruled out that the Philippines may take such extreme measures to further exacerbate the situation in the South China Sea and the China-Philippines relationship under the misjudgment of the situation, the probability of them taking such extreme actions is still relatively low.

Successive Philippine governments have shown periodic swings in dealing with relations with China. These swings can even occur within the same presidential term. The predecessor of former President Rodrigo Duterte, in the first four years of his presidency, distanced the Philippines from the US, reduced provocations in the South China Sea and actively participated in the Belt and Road Initiative. However, over the last two years in



his presidency, the situation in the South China Sea had been tense. And he restored the Philippines' key military agreement with the US.

Since President Ferdinand Marcos Jr entered office in 2022, this trend in foreign policy is still evident. He not only became the first Philippine president to visit the White House in 10 years but also granted the US military access to four military sites. The Philippines under his leadership frequently clashed with China over the South China Sea issue.

However, he also visited China in early 2023 and made a guarantee that the military bases accessible to the US would not be used in any offensive action, expressing

a certain degree of goodwill toward China. Therefore, it is premature to say the Philippines will continue to antagonize China in the future based solely on its current "tough policy" in the South China Sea.

Furthermore, some domestic factions in the Philippines believe that the US would provide substantial support to the Philippines in the event of a military conflict with China. This is a serious strategic misjudgment influenced by two misleading signals. Firstly, in February 2023, the US and the Philippines expanded the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The Philippines agreed to allow US military presence in four new military bases, believing that the US would reciprocate and

provide strong support to the Philippines in the event of a military conflict with China.

Additionally, the US has expressed its intention to invite the Philippines to join its "Indo-Pacific" multilateral security cooperation mechanism, creating a new "Quadrilateral Security Mechanism" including the US, Japan, Australia and the Philippines to address potential conflicts in the South China Sea. However, the US has never publicly committed to militarily assisting or supporting the Philippines in the event of a military conflict with China. The Philippine government should abandon such illusion.

The current policy of provoking China by the Philippines is not well-received within the ASEAN. ASEAN member states hope that, amid the backdrop of the US and its allies using the Indo-Pacific Strategy to confront China, China can exercise maximum restraint, and they do not want their own countries to be used by the US as "pawns" in its efforts to contain China.

Currently, the escalating provocations by the Philippines in the South China Sea do not align with the overall interests of ASEAN countries in pursuing peace, security and stability. It is clear that the ASEAN countries will not take

sides with the Philippines and will not allow the situation to escalate further.

Relevant Philippine authorities should not underestimate China's determination and capability to maintain stability in the South China Sea. Currently, Philippine authorities and Western media have been continuously engaging in attention-seeking, live-streaming provocations.

Besides exposing their attempts to wage a "public opinion war" to discredit China, it further demonstrates the lack of strategic thinking by the Marcos Jr government on critical issues related to regional peace and stability, putting the Philippines' national image and national security in a perilous situation. Philippine authorities should promptly cease such meaningless sensationalism and return to the path of resolving South China Sea disputes through negotiations and dialogue with China, and by reaching the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea as soon as possible.

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## The US bears responsibility for the resurgence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

By Ding Long

On Saturday, Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), launched a large-scale surprise attack on Israel, resulting in a significant number of casualties and penetrating multiple military bases and Israeli settlements. Israel immediately declared that Israel is now "at war" and vowed to "take revenge" on the Hamas militants.

This event is undoubtedly the most serious conflict between Israel and Palestine in over a decade, with both sides trapped in a vicious cycle of violence, jeopardizing the fragile geopolitical stability in the Middle East.

The re-eruption of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is regrettable, and both sides bear responsibility. Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian territories and its refusal to accept the "two-state solution" serve as the root causes of the conflict. However, new dynamics in the Palestinian, regional and international situation have acted as the trigger for this latest outbreak.

Firstly, Hamas launched the attack in retaliation for the hardline policies and extremist actions of Israel's far-right government against the Palestinians. Since the Netanyahu government came to

power, it has consistently challenged the Palestinian redline and ultimately fueled Palestinian anger. Hamas named this military operation the "Al-Aqsa Flood," highlighting its religious significance and revengeful intent.

Secondly, Hamas sought to counter the marginalization of the Palestinian issue. Recently, Saudi Arabia has been negotiating a "normalization" deal with Israel and has come close to an agreement brokered by the US. Saudi Arabia holds a prominent position in both the Arab and Islamic worlds, and once it establishes diplomatic relations with Israel, the Palestinian cause is likely to be greatly impacted.

Furthermore, Hamas aimed to maintain its leadership position in the armed resistance movement of Palestine. In recent years, Palestinian armed resistance has been led primarily by emerging small-scale militant groups like the "Lions' Den" in the West Bank, which challenged Hamas' leadership among Palestinians.

It was necessary for Hamas to defend its leadership position through a major, attention-grabbing attack.

Lastly, the economic situation in the Gaza Strip was on the brink of collapse, motivating Hamas to seek a way out for survival.

Judging from the background of the incident, it is clear that the US also has a looming presence and certain responsibility in the bloody conflict.

First of all, the US abandoned justice by supporting Israel in its conflict with Palestine and condoning Israel's behaviors, which eventually led to this tragedy. Since the beginning of this year, the US, which claims to be the mediator for peace in the Middle East and the most important ally of Israel, has not fulfilled its obligation to promote justice and prevent tensions from escalating. Instead, it has become an accomplice in stirring up the conflict between Palestine and Israel.

Second, the Biden administration has chosen a time like this to desperately push for the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, with the main purpose of boosting Biden's votes in next year's election. It has been acting poorly in Middle East affairs. Therefore, the Biden administration is trying to expand the results of the Abraham Accords to highlight the "fruits of peace" in the Middle East.

However, such a "peace in the Middle East" that the US has been showing off has led to an unprecedented threat to the survival of the Palestinians and ultimately led to a bloody conflict.

The current escalation of tensions and violence proves that a Middle East peace plan without the two-state solution will only intensify conflicts and hinder peace.

Finally, the US has its own intentions by pushing to improve relations between the Arab countries and Israel – to establish a new political and military alliance against Iran, enhance its ability to control the situation in the Middle East, and, take a longer view, to try to create a coterie to marginalize China's influence in the Middle East.

The "peace" promoted by the US in the Middle East is likely to bring more divergences, contradictions and conflicts to the region. If the US continues to have a bias toward Israel, it will lead the peace process in the Middle East astray, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will recur once and again, while peace in the Middle East will become only castles in the air.

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