

VIEWS

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Will Manila stop creating trouble in 2024?

The Ferdinand Marcos Jr government in the Philippines veered away from the previous Rodrigo Duterte administration's South China Sea policy in 2023, by making provocative moves that have raised tensions in the region.

True, Philippine President Marcos Jr, acknowledging the souring of Sino-Philippine relations, has said that his government will "solve that problem of Ren'ai Reef" itself, raising hopes that Manila might navigate a different course and appropriately handle the South China Sea disputes. But the shift in the Marcos Jr government's South China Sea policy is not merely a result of inexperience or wrong policies; it is the result of a confluence of internal and external factors.

First, the imminent deterioration and disintegration of the vessel, BRP *Sierra Madre*, is the direct reason behind the Philippines' frequent attempts to create troubles in the region. In May 1999, just one day after a US missile dropped on the Chinese embassy in what was then Yugoslavia, the Philippine authorities intentionally ran aground the dilapidated tank landing ship on Ren'ai Reef. Using the excuse of a leaking hull, they refused to tow it away later.

For quite some time, Manila had been transporting construction materials to the reef to reinforce the stranded vessel. Due to continuous erosion caused by sea waves and winds, BRP *Sierra Madre* seems to be on the verge of disintegrating, prompting Manila to accelerate the large-scale transportation of construction materials to repair the stranded ship and turn it into a permanent structure with the aim of unlawfully occupying Ren'ai Reef.

Second, the escalating domestic political strife is a key reason why the Philippines has changed its South China Sea policy with the tacit help of the United States. The situation became increasingly clear last year due to an imminent rupture in the political alliance "UniTeam" between the Marcos and Duterte families.

Particularly noteworthy is the intensifying dispute between Martin Romualdez, a cousin of Marcos Jr and the current speaker of the House, and Rodrigo Duterte and his daughter Sara Duterte. The dispute stems from the Marcos Jr camp's attempt to break free of the influence of the Duterte family, establish its own authority and expand the Marcos family's influence.

As a result, either driven by Marcos Jr himself or by his camp, there has been a shift in the Philippines' domestic and foreign policies. It is now "leaning towards the US and opposing China". This move serves two purposes: garnering the support of the military and police, as they can benefit significantly from appropriations; and securing the support of the US to weaken the power and influence of the political rivals.

And third, the US' intensifying efforts

to contain China is an external factor prompting the Philippines to take risky actions. Over the past decade, the US, identifying China as its primary competitor, has been meddling in the South China Sea, the East China Sea and other regional issues to sow discord between China and its neighbors, and build a unified front to counter China. The US has been using the Philippines, a treaty ally and a crucial link in the "first island chain", as a key lever to interfere in the South China Sea issue, consolidate its military presence in the region, and trigger regional confrontations.

After encouraging the Philippines to stir up trouble in the South China Sea, the US said that its Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines is applicable to the South China Sea issue. The two countries also released the US-Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines in 2024, asserting that "an armed attack in the Pacific,

including anywhere in the South China Sea, on either of their public vessels, aircraft, or armed forces — which includes their Coast Guards — would invoke mutual defense commitments under Articles IV and V of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty".

This has emboldened the Philippines to test the reliability of the US' commitment, by frequently creating trouble in the South China Sea.

The three factors mentioned above do not seem to have diminished this year, when the erosion of *Sierra Madre* could accelerate, widening the cracks between the different political camps in the Philippines.

Moreover, in the past year, while transporting construction materials to Ren'ai

Reef, the Philippine authorities invited a large number of journalists to visit the reef in the name of "transparency". In reality, Manila fabricated false information and edited video clips to arouse public anger against China.

The frequent provocative moves of the Philippines in the South China Sea last year have further damaged Sino-Philippine ties and undermined regional stability, forcing knowledgeable individuals and businesspeople, both in the Philippines and other countries, to criticize the Philippine government's moves.

In short, the prospects of the Philippines changing course, exercising restraint and appropriately handling the South China Sea issues in 2024, are not high. But it is clear that Manila's wrong approach will create more troubles not only for the region, but also itself.

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MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Francisco José Leandro

BRI inspires concerted efforts for global development

The Belt and Road, after 10 years of operation, has acquired the status of the ancient Silk Road, raised its brand status, and become one of the biggest protagonists and practitioners of economic globalization.

The evolution of this Chinese initiative has taught the international community a number of lessons. Among them, two are inspiring as well as revealing. First, the Belt and Road Initiative has prompted a number of global power contenders to take parallel steps to build on similar ideas while raising new concerns in order to promote high-quality development, environmental sustainability and social progress. And second, the initiative has not only been developing and extending its reach; it has also pioneered a leading cooperation mechanism, making modernization a new driver of globalization.

The Belt and Road Initiative has prompted other economies to launch similar initiatives to advance economic development both regionally and globally. For instance, India and Japan announced the "Asia-Africa Growth Corridor" in 2016, the United States, Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development advanced the "Blue Dot Network" in 2019, the G7 member states launched the "Build Back Better World" initiative in 2021 and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment in 2022 to mobilize \$600 billion for global infrastructure investments by 2027, and the European Union proposed the "Global Gateway" in 2021 to boost smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport sectors and strengthen education, healthcare and

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research systems across the world.

These initiatives are in different stages of development and have different levels of global engagement, in some cases with very limited success, but they all share a common thread: promoting values on a global scale and pushing for globalization. As the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said, the Global Gateway will facilitate "smart investments in quality infrastructure, respecting the highest social and environmental standards, in line with the EU's values and standards. The Global Gateway strategy is a template for how Europe can build more resilient connections with the world."

The latest example of such an initiative is the "India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor", which was launched by France, Germany, India, Italy, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United States and the European Commission at the G20 Summit in New Delhi last year to link Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

More important, the Belt and Road Initiative is challenging the monopoly of the West in the postwar world order, as it

represents a framework of collaborative practices so as to present quasi-global solutions to common global problems. And at the opening ceremony of the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, China's top leader emphasized that Belt and Road cooperation has developed from physical connectivity to institutional connectivity.

China has laid down the important guiding principles for high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, which include the principle of "planning together, building together, and benefiting together", the philosophy of open, green and clean cooperation, and the pursuit of "high-standard, people-centered and sustainable cooperation". One of the strongest arguments in favor of the initiative, apart from its size and economic leverage, is its unequivocal contribution to global economic growth, which in turn will help realize the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

All these initiatives are aimed at connecting markets and production centers around the world to ensure the unimpeded flow of goods as well as to raise social capital. Similarly, all the initiatives are committed to protecting the environment, improving governance and pursuing sustainable growth. But what differentiates the Belt and Road Initiative from non-Chinese driven global initiatives is the fact that the former has been adapting to new challenges by, for example, promoting digitalization, raising product and service quality, transferring technologies, enhancing industrial efficiency, better protecting the environment, safeguarding energy security, and improving governance while also pro-

moting supplementary initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative.

Moreover, the Belt and Road Initiative does not present itself as the only model for realizing modernization and globalization to be copied by the current and potential partners. It rather presents a conglomerate of intertwined viewpoints, seeking joint efforts, promoting people-to-people exchanges, investing in development projects, and making more efforts to create a fairer and equitable global economic order by ending the US dollar's hegemony in global trade.

The Belt and Road is a framework initiative, which in conjunction with a number of others and with an innovative global vision seeks market access with consent and promotes globalization as an alternative to the United States-led monopolized economic and trade order. The Belt and Road Initiative has not only prompted other economies to launch similar trade and development initiatives, but also captured the imagination of the majority of the countries, as it advances a framework for cooperation rather than adopting a "buy or leave" attitude.

The Belt and Road is a leading global initiative and a framework for global cooperation, encouraging other global powers to launch similar initiatives, and promote modernization and global economic development based on a shared vision.

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Chu Zhaohui

The young need to cultivate personal traits for jobs

The employment situation in 2024 remains challenging because of factors such as the fast-changing international landscape, economic condition at home, private enterprises' below par performance, and the increasing number of college graduates. Recognizing these challenges, the Ministry of Education recently issued a notice outlining 26 measures to boost employment and entrepreneurship. The notice is especially aimed at youths who will graduate from college this year.

While the notice emphasizes the need to increase market-oriented employment channels and encourage private companies and small and medium-sized enterprises to recruit more people, it acknowledges the limitations of administrative departments in this regard. That's why the notice highlights specific efforts, including ongoing initiatives such as "university leaders visiting enterprises for job opportunities", developing a high-quality employment guidance service system, and increasingly using of the national university student employment service platform to get jobs.

Additionally, it emphasizes leveraging policy-driven positions, exploring grassroots employment opportunities, and continuing initiatives such as the "special positions plan" designed for graduates to teach in rural elementary schools, "three supports and one relief" that encourages graduates to contribute to the development of rural areas by working in fields such as agriculture, education, healthcare and poverty relief, and the "western plan" that encourages graduates to engage in volunteer service in remote western areas for one to three years.

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But given that private enterprises typically account for about 90 percent of employment, the impact of policy-driven programs is limited and may not help overcome all the employment challenges. Increasing policy-driven programs beyond the government's fiscal capacity not only disrupts the normal market order and burdens taxpayers, but also affects the business environment of private enterprises, leading to long-term social problems and hindering employment.

On a macro level, the key to solving the employment problem lies in liberated thinking, a regulated legal market, and the use of technologies to create more jobs. Also, by promoting social equality and eliminating extreme disparities, the authorities can empower workers to become real stakeholders in businesses.

People, in general, have a tendency to link employability to educational qualifications. In a society that accords high importance to college degrees, qualifications translate into employability. However, in a normal work evaluation environment, job performance becomes crucial. As such, people who are professionally competent can perform very well at their job, and those with pleasing personality can more easily land a job.

The emphasis on academic qualifications has led to an oversaturation of degrees in the job market. As a result, the number of students taking the postgraduate entrance examination this year has decreased by more than 300,000. The factors contributing to this "degree inflation" are numerous and challenging to address in the short term, meaning they will continue for some time.

As for job seekers, they must broaden their description of job, by moving away from a narrow focus on academic credentials. Surveys show that today's job seekers, mostly the only child of their parents burdened by excessive pressure to earn a college degree but without learning life skills and practical knowledge, often exhibit two common personality deficiencies.

One, being what can be called passive personalities, most of today's job seekers lack the ability to set independent goals for learning and work, and are, to a large extent, dependent on their parents. And two, many of them are loners and therefore reluctant to engage with others and build friendship and forge connections, which could help them get a job.

It is evident that for the majority of job seekers today, learning new skills is key to increasing their chances of getting a job. Hence, higher education institutions should not confine students to classrooms; they should also work out programs to enhance students' cooperation spirit and teach them new skills.

Also, given that technological advancements are creating new employment opportunities, many believe humanities graduates are less likely to get well-paying jobs. Despite this, humanities graduates still find stable jobs in their respective fields. This shows there is still room to accommodate new graduates in the job market.

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