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Note from Head of CS3

Dear All,

We are happy to publish the thirteenth issue of the Sinometer: The China Strategic Monitor, a monthly newsletter by the Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (CS3), USI.

The newsletter is divided into two sections. The newsletter begins with an analysis of the possible scenarios for the Indo-Pacific and the problems marring the region. It is then followed by news. China's population has declined for the first time in years due to its 'one-child policy'. The country has announced new internet bans, and scientists have created a 'forever-staying-afloat' drone. Finally, remarks by Nepal's president at a Sino-Nepal meeting and by the Chinese foreign minister in Africa are part of the international segment.

This issue aims to give a holistic perspective of China in the backdrop of China's internal challenges and a growing relationship with third-world countries. We hope that budding China Watchers will take an interest in the newsletter. Happy reading!

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Analysis

What is next for the Indo-Pacific?

(Abridged from China Daily's article, 'Looking at the 'Indo-Pacific' in 2023' by Professor Wei Zongyou, a professor of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University)

Until Nancy Pelosi, the US House Speaker visited Taiwan against Beijing's wishes in early August 2022, the 'Indo-Pacific' region was mainly at peace. While 'old issues' pose severe dangers to regional peace and stability, three new occurrences will promote regional peace trends.

First, relations between China and the US may finally recover after years of free fall. In November 2022, right before the G20 Summit in Indonesia, President Xi Jinping and President Joe Biden met for the first time in person since Biden's inauguration. The two presidents concurred that developing the guiding principles for China-US relations should be a joint effort by their respective diplomatic teams.

The two leaders also concurred that their finance teams would keep in touch and coordinate on macroeconomic measures and relations between economies and trade. The two sides would communicate and work together in various fields, including public health, agriculture, and food security.

In other words, the two leaders agreed to maintain communication and dialogue, effectively handle national differences, and avoid strategic misunderstandings. The first stage in the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's follow-up on the agreements and suggestions the two presidents made will be a trip to China in February. Additionally, in order to handle the intricate economic and trade issues between them, the financial and trade teams will resume their lines of contact. The continuing dialogue will help manage conflicts, avoid strategic errors and misunderstandings, and pave the way for fruitful cooperation across various fields, such as climate change, public health, economics, and trade relations. Additionally, there is little question that improving US-China relations would lessen the mounting tensions in the Indo-Pacific.

Secondly, some outstanding opportunities may be to reverse the deteriorating trend in China-India relations. The past several years has seen significant difficulties in

China-India relations due to border conflicts, strategic distrust, and growing competition. India even put its long-standing non-alignment foreign policy in jeopardy by joining the Quad, a loose alliance of the US, Japan, Australia, and India that will be upgraded from a senior-level security dialogue to a leader-level summit in 2021 with the aim of containing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. India refused to sign the trade agreement known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, of which China is a part. Still, it did sign the US-led 'Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity,' which does not include China.

However, India continues to be wary of placing all its eggs in one basket in order to avoid coming out as brazenly unfriendly to China. In 2023, India will host the G20 Summit and the annual summit of the heads of state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for the first time, making them two of the most important international events ever. India and China are both members of the SCO, and China founded the SCO. As India prepares for these two significant summits, there is a potential that China and India's diplomatic ties will strengthen and the two nations will cooperate to stop the worsening relations.

Thirdly, conditions in the South China Sea could improve. Due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, the South China Sea Code of Conduct debates and dialogues have mostly frozen over the past three years, with just a few offline meetings taking place to develop the draught COC wording. Due to China's essential policy modifications addressing the COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control, more offline conversations and meetings between China and ASEAN about the COC are anticipated in 2023. The parties should try to complete the consultation on the draught text as quickly as practicable.

However, the security situation in the Indo-Pacific area will still have at least three issues in 2023 despite the improving developments. These include the happenings in Taiwan and China's involvement, the situation in the Korean peninsula and the boundary dispute between India and China.

The primary concern is Taiwan. The Biden administration has made it clear to China on several occasions that it upholds the one-China policy, opposes

Taiwanese independence, and opposes 'two Chinas' or 'One China, One Taiwan'. Since assuming office, Biden has promised at least four times that the US will defend Taiwan if it is 'attacked' by the Chinese mainland, though the White House has subsequently changed its position each time.

The second is the situation in North Korea. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea's supreme leader, Kim Jong-un, declared on 31 December 2022, at the Enlarged Session of the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Korean Labor Party that in order to protect its security and sovereignty and build a deterrent against the Republic of Korea's threat, the DPRK would develop new intercontinental missiles, launch new military reconnaissance satellites, and significantly increase its nuclear stockpile. This is a cause of concern for other countries because an autocratic country like North Korea piling up on weapons is a worldwide threat.

The third is the conflict over China and India's shared border. December 2022 saw fighting between Chinese and Indian border soldiers on the eastern part of the China-India border, with minimal deaths on either side. The episodes had no adverse effects on general bilateral relations. However, it draws attention to the perilous situation and how it may spark a fight. Even though all parties wish to keep the border issue under control, it is unlikely that much progress can be made in discussions due to the situation's complexity. The most they can hope for is to provide some guidelines for border zones in dispute and avoid employing force when disputes occur.¹

Despite challenges, what unfolds in the Indo-Pacific region remains to be seen.

¹ <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202301/17/WS63c5df95a31057c47eba9f33.html>

News

Population declines in China for the first time since 1961

With a record-low national birth rate of 6.77 births per 1,000 people, China's population has decreased for the first time in 60 years. The population decreased by 850,000 from 2021 to 2022, reaching 1.4118 billion. Years of dropping birth rates in China have prompted many programmes to attempt and reverse the trend. However, it entered what one official called a 'period of negative population growth' seven years after abandoning the one-child policy. According to data issued on Tuesday by China's National Bureau of Statistics, the birth rate fell to 7.22 in 2022 from 7.52 in 2021.

Earlier official statistics predicted an impending demographic catastrophe, which would eventually reduce China's labour force and raise the cost of healthcare and other social security benefits. China's population was expanding at its slowest rate in decades, according to results of every ten years census revealed in 2021. Other East Asian nations like Japan and South Korea are also experiencing population decline and ageing populations.²

Chinese internet censors begin a campaign against 'fake news' on Covid cases

As part of a month-long cleanup drive, China's top internet regulator warned that it would take down 'fake news' that promotes unfavourable opinions about Covid infections over the Lunar New Year. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) issued the warning two months after Beijing abruptly decided to eliminate practically all its zero-Covid regulations, leading to an infection outbreak severely taxing the healthcare system.

The warning comes as hundreds of millions of people return home for the Lunar New Year, raising worries that the large-scale emigration would cause a new wave of Covid infections. In order to stop the public from being deceived and inciting social panic, the CAC stated that it would examine and deal with fabrications

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-64300190>

concerning the trajectory of the epidemic and the current preventative strategies, fake antivirus stories, and patient experiences.

Over the past two months, China's internet has been inundated with complaints about overcrowded hospitals, overworked medical staff, and reports of far higher than typical activity at crematoriums. Additionally, online users reported being unable to obtain vital drugs. The CAC declared that it would also vigorously combat deliberate internet campaigns' to stoke racial animosity, foment fear, and emphasise 'the dark side of society'.³

Chinese researchers create a unique new drone

Researchers in northwest China claim to have created a method of using high-energy laser beams to keep drones in the air 'forever' rather than destroy them. Many nations, including China, have developed robust laser systems as anti-drone weapons. But Professor Li Xuelong and his associates from Northwestern Polytechnical University (NPU) took a different tack regarding the drone-laser connection. They believed that a high-intensity laser beam might monitor and power a drone remotely if equipped with a photoelectric conversion module that turned light energy into electricity.

They believed that a high-intensity laser beam might monitor and power a drone remotely if equipped with a photoelectric conversion module that turned light energy into electricity. According to the team from NPU's school of artificial intelligence, optics, and electronics, a recent experiment successfully combined the autonomous charging process with intelligent signal transmission and processing technology, demonstrating the limitless endurance potential for drones powered by optics (ODD).⁴

Nepal President says country prepared to cooperate with China for regional peace and stability

On 13 January 2023, President Bidya Devi Bhandari of Nepal emphasised her

³ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3207405/chinas-internet-censors-launch-crack-down-fake-news-about-covid-cases-build-lunar-new-year?module=storypackage&pgtype=sport>

⁴ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3205885/chinese-scientists-develop-laser-powered-drone-stay-aloft-forever>

readiness to work with China in order to maintain regional peace and security, promote prosperity and development in the region, and advance the development of a society with a shared destiny for all people. While collecting the credentials from the incoming Chinese Ambassador Chen Song, Bhandari spoke of the close ties and good relations that exist between China and Nepal as longtime neighbours and friendly neighbours. He also mentioned the accomplishments of real-world cooperation in numerous fields.

The president emphasised that Nepal has consistently and vehemently supported the one-China policy and would never allow any forces to exploit Nepali soil to conduct hostilities against China. The Chinese government and people's support of Nepal in maintaining its national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and development interests is much appreciated by the Nepali side.

To enhance bilateral relations to be as lofty and magnificent as the Himalayas and to provide a brighter future for the people of the two nations, in order to aggressively execute the central accord achieved by the two countries' heads of state, develop mutually beneficial cooperation, and enhance political trust, Bhandari stated that Nepal is willing to work with China.

Chen said that since the two countries established diplomatic ties, their good neighbourly and friendly relations have grown and strengthened in accordance with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. According to Chen, the relationship between China and Nepal was upgraded to a strategic partnership of collaboration in 2019, opening new possibilities for cordial relationships and containing an everlasting friendship for progress and prosperity. Chen said that China is willing to work with Nepal to enhance high-level interactions, establish strategic mutual trust, and push high-quality Belt and Road cooperation to promote the two countries progress and prosperity.⁵

Remarks by Foreign Minister Qin Gang at the headquarters of the project of the Africa Center for Disease Control and Prevention

Another significant milestone in the China-Africa collaboration is the creation of the

⁵ <https://english.news.cn/20230114/1080b585838e4c60b625866b87d8b878/c.html>

head office of the African Center for Disease Control and Prevention. 'This partnership between China and Africa is certainly a new miracle'. Foreign Minister Qin Gang believed the Africa CDC would contribute more to public health in Africa as well as the health and well-being of the African people if both sides worked together.

Additionally, it will add a brand-new, glorious chapter to the tale of China-Africa ties. As part of a distinguished diplomatic tradition, the Chinese Foreign Minister has been to Africa for the first time abroad each year for the past 33 years. China and Africa will always remain a community with a shared future, regardless of how the global environment shifts.⁶

⁶ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202301/t20230111_11005847.html

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