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Note from Head of CS3

Dear All,

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

The importance of China in the global and regional context is ever evolving and this change can be witnessed in geo-political and geo-economic domains. The interest in the fields of Chinese security, economy and political relations has generated several debates making it a focal point of global affairs. The magazine is an attempt to give a peek into some of the important happenings in China and its impact on the world.

The newsletter is divided into two sections. The newsletter begins by analysing Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's high-profile visit to China. The second section examines several news articles published world over covering China centric issues. In another case of deteriorating relations between the US and China, a Chinese airship was spotted in the US, and officials from sides engaged in a fiery exchange of allegations. The other pieces include China's issues with India, Pakistan and Africa.

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

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Analysis

IRANIAN PRESIDENT VISITS CHINA

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited China in February 2022, marking his first trip to the country since taking office in August 2021. Raisi's visit aimed to advance a prominent cooperation agreement that had been signed by Iran's previous government in March 2021. During his three-day stay in Beijing, Raisi engaged in discussions with Chinese President Xi Jinping and oversaw the signing of 20 cooperation agreements, including those pertaining to commerce and tourism.

President Xi conveyed his support for Iran, which has faced severe pressure and sanctions from the United States due to its nuclear program. According to a statement released by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Xi expressed China's support for Iran in preserving national sovereignty and resisting unilateralism and bullying. China regularly condemns US hegemony and unilateralism, and Iran has aligned itself with this position. However, a representative from the Chinese Foreign Ministry refuted the notion that Beijing's approach to Iran was aimed at balancing US influence in the region, instead emphasizing the cordial relations between China and Iran, as indicated by Wang Wenbin.

Xi also indicated China's opposition to external forces interfering in Iran's domestic affairs and destabilizing its security and stability. Furthermore, he expressed a willingness to engage constructively in discussions aimed at reviving the nuclear agreement reached in 2015, from which the United States withdrew during the Trump administration. However, no further details were provided on this matter.

Iran's Foreign Ministry's assessment of the visit revealed impatience with the pace of the countries' relationship. While customary expressions of friendship were exchanged, Raisi struck an unusually harsh note, stating that the development of relations between Iran and China had been insufficient, and that greater steps were necessary to make up for this backwardness.

As a result of Beijing's ability to buy petroleum from Russia at a significant discount, even China's oil imports from Iran have dropped significantly over the last year.

China may not agree in principle with the severe sanctions imposed by the United States against Iran. However, businesses there are still hesitant to openly disobey them and risk losing access to the American financial system. Iran has few choices except China when dealing with US sanctions. Contrarily, China is blessed with many allies, even in Iran's close region.¹

¹ <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/irans-president-visits-china-hoping-to-revitalize-ties/>

News

The Saga of the Chinese Airship in the US

As per a high-ranking military official, an unidentified balloon breached the airspace of the United States on January 28th, in the northern vicinity of Alaska's Aleutian Islands. In the ensuing days, the balloon traversed through various regions, including Northwest Territories, Idaho, Montana, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, North Carolina, and finally, South Carolina, where it was first observed by the general public. According to Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, on 4 February, a fighter jet from the United States Northern Command brought the balloon down in American airspace above American territorial seas, some six nautical miles off the coast of South Carolina.²

Once again, the United States and China found themselves in a confrontation, as the Chinese authorities conceded ownership of the aforementioned balloon. However, they contended that it was a civilian product designed for scientific purposes, specifically meteorological research. The Chinese foreign ministry contended that the airship's directional control was limited, causing it to drift into the airspace of the United States due to the influence of westerly winds. However, US Defence Department was "certain" that it was, in fact, a Chinese surveillance balloon.³ As a result, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, reportedly set to visit China on February 5, cancelled the diplomatic mission a day before, saying "he'd only go when the time is right."

Amid the China-India Border Row, Rapid Development Takes a Toll on Himalayan Wildlife, Environment

The rapid military build-up and infrastructure development in the Himalayan region to counter Chinese aggression has raised significant ecological and environmental concerns. In the past two years, the Indian government has deployed 50,000 troops and six divisions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), primarily in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. The deployment of such a large number of defence personnel requires vast areas of land, placing immense pressure on protected areas like

² <https://abcnews.go.com/US/chinese-surveillance-balloon-spotted/story?id=96883610>

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/chinese-spy-balloon-montana-flight-tracking/>

wildlife sanctuaries in Ladakh and affecting the livelihoods of local tribes. Moreover, the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has constructed approximately 6,763 km of roads, including 1,400 km along the border, and built 87 bridges between 2021 and 2022. The BRO budget has also increased by almost 40% in the last year.

This military and infrastructure expansion puts additional pressure on the already fragile ecology of the Himalayan region and disregards the sensitivities of the local communities. Environmental experts have criticised the tenth meeting of the infrastructure committee that aims to expedite infrastructure development in the region as it would undermine environmental appraisal and assessment of the region. Even the National Board for Wildlife (NWBL), which is responsible for promoting the conservation and protection of wildlife and forests, has approved the construction of a road through two protected areas. Such decisions have been criticised by environmentalists as they show a lack of concern for biodiversity. Furthermore, the NWBL has been criticised for functioning more as a clearance agency than a protection agency. Additionally, the region faces the challenge of climate change, and preserving biodiversity is crucial for stabilising the region's ecosystems.

Chinese activities along the Himalayan border continue as Beijing is also enhancing its military infrastructure, which might result in more clashes in the future. If such a situation persists, traditional security issues may take over non-traditional security issues.⁴

Xi Calls for a High-Level China-Africa Community With a Shared Future

During the 36th African Union summit, President Xi Jinping pledged to work with African countries towards a shared future. He commended the African Union for its role in unifying African nations against global and internal challenges and its efforts towards establishing a free trade zone. Additionally, President Xi acknowledged the steady growth of China-Africa cooperation in various areas and expressed his eagerness to further enhance friendly relations between China and Africa.⁵

⁴ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/chinas-actions-bringing-india-us-closer-101676832297040.html>

⁵ <https://english.news.cn/20230218/4fd6f7d6a1ff4da787e08a705590222e/c.html>

China's New \$700 Million Loan to Pakistan Fuels Concerns About its Debt Load

Pakistan has recently secured a \$700 million loan from China to address its ongoing economic crisis. However, this development has sparked concerns among various countries regarding China's alleged propensity to ensnare Pakistan into a debt trap. Pakistan already owes a significant debt of \$25 billion to China and its commercial banks, as part of its total foreign debt of around \$100 billion, of which China accounts for almost a third. Despite being Pakistan's primary creditor, China is reputed for imposing higher interest rates than multilateral lending institutions.⁶

Statehood Day in Arunachal Pradesh: Celebrating Over Three Decades of Independence

On 20 February 1987, the statehood of Arunachal Pradesh was granted. Situated in the vicinity of the Himalayas, this state is primarily mountainous and shares borders with three countries- China, Myanmar, and Bhutan, along with two Indian states, namely, Assam and Bhutan. During the late 19th century, the British government made inroads into the region and introduced the British administration system. Subsequently, in 1912-13, the British government created North-Eastern Frontier Tracts, which consisted of three regions. In 1914, the British government demarcated the boundary between the region and Tibet, which caused resentment in China as it regarded the area as part of Tibet and also played a significant role in the Sino-Indian war of 1962. Following India's independence, the region was renamed the Northeast Frontier Agency and remained a territory of the union from 1972 to 1987.⁷

China Expands Military Exchange and Cooperation with Foreign Countries Through Joints Drills in Pakistan

Fifty nations, including China, participated in the AMAN-23 multinational maritime exercise, which was organised by the Pakistan Navy. Following the joint drills, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy's guided missile destroyer Nanning

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/23/pakistan-loan-china-intensifies-debt-burden-fears>

⁷ <https://www.freepressjournal.in/india/statehood-day-in-arunachal-pradesh-celebrating-over-three-decades-of-independence>

was commended by Pakistan's navy chief. The five-day exercise, which began on February 10 and concluded on February 14, took place in the North Arabian Sea and included an international fleet review followed by the impressive AMAN Formation, which featured the Pakistan Navy and foreign naval vessels, including the Type 052D destroyer Nanning of the PLA Navy. The event was attended by Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

China's participation in these joint drills indicates an increase in its military exchanges and cooperation with foreign countries, which have been hampered for the past three years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. More comparable events are expected to take place in the future, according to analysts. The collaborative drills concentrated on live-fire shooting, air defence exercises, search and rescue, anti-piracy, and counterterrorism activities. After closely cooperating with forces from various nations, the PLA Navy ship Nanning exhibited command and control capacity. The drills enhanced the participants' ability to address maritime security threats collaboratively and demonstrated their commitment to doing so. According to Song, as China expands its military cooperation and exchanges with more nations in the future, it serves to protect both global peace and regional stability.

Warships from the participating countries, including the US, Sri Lanka, Japan, Malaysia, Italy, and Indonesia, were also dispatched. The American warship that participated in AMAN-23 only appeared during the sea phase and did not make a port visit to Karachi.⁸

The Global Security Initiative (GSI) Concept Paper Calls for Conflict Resolution Via Dialogue and Rejects Power Politics.

On February 21, China released the Global Security Initiative Concept Paper, which seeks to address the escalating dangers and challenges facing the world, notably the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, by eliminating the root causes of international conflicts and promoting global security. This paper outlines 20 critical cooperation paths, explaining key concepts and principles, specifying cooperation methods, and highlighting China's obligations and unwavering commitment to maintaining worldwide peace.

⁸ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202302/1285538.shtml>

The concept paper underscores several fundamental ideas and principles, including the pursuit of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security, respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations, adherence to the objectives and principles of the United Nations (UN) Charter, and the need to consider the legitimate security concerns of all nations. It also stresses the importance of peaceful dispute resolution and conflict settlement through dialogue and consultation while ensuring security in both traditional and non-traditional domains. Rejecting the Cold War mindset, unilateralism, bloc antagonism, and hegemony, China advocates for genuine multilateralism among nations. The paper also affirms the shared understanding that no nation can win a nuclear conflict and that political solutions should be encouraged for global and regional flashpoints.

China's initiative aims to provide a comprehensive framework for international cooperation, emphasizing cooperation, equality, and mutual benefits, and promoting global security through joint efforts. The concept paper's publication reflects China's intention to engage with the international community and play a greater role in shaping global security and governance.

Qin stated that China would continue to encourage peace negotiations, give Chinese wisdom for a comprehensive solution to the Ukrainian issue, and collaborate with the international community to promote conversation and consultation to meet the concerns of all parties in the pursuit of shared security. Meanwhile, we ask relevant nations to avoid throwing fuel to the fire, stop criticising China, and stop exacerbating the situation with phrases like "Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow."⁹

China Announced its Ambitious Space Station Expansion Plans

China has announced plans to expand its near-Earth orbit space station by launching a new module that will be connected to the existing structure, creating a cross-shaped combination. The China Manned Space Agency (CMSA) revealed its plans after completing the T-shaped structure of the space station last year. The new module, serving as a node cabin, will feature multiple docking ports, like the core module Tianhe, to enable the space station to accept additional spaceships.

⁹ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202302/1285892.shtml>

Additionally, China is constructing a new-generation reusable crewed spacecraft that can carry four to seven humans into orbit and return over 700 kg of cargo to Earth, an improvement from its current spacecraft that can send three people into space and return 50 kg of payload.

The primary goal of the space station has now shifted from technological advances during its construction stage to the performance of space applications, such as determining how to protect spaceship metals from bacteria, manufacturing oxygen from algae in space, and converting heat energy into electricity. Over the next few years, nearly 1,000 applications across 65 projects are set to be executed on the space station. The CMSA aims to enhance critical technologies in special material preparation, stem cell and regenerative medicine, high-precision time-frequency systems, and quantum precision measurement.

Furthermore, the CMSA has announced China's plan for human lunar exploration, including the launch of three astronauts into lunar orbit and the landing of two astronauts on the Moon. Additionally, a lunar probe and sample return mission involving human and machine collaboration are in the works. The flagship telescope of China is also scheduled to survey an all-sky region of 17,500 square degrees for ten years to research frontier sciences such as the rapid expansion of the galaxy, dark matter, and dark energy.¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://english.news.cn/20230228/f746f3afe62f46fca7d0d69d54498be7/c.html>

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