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**Sinometer for the Month of September 2023**

## ASEAN's First Naval Exercise in South China Sea near Disputed area

By Manav Saini



In a significant move aimed at bolstering regional stability and fostering military cooperation, countries within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have initiated joint 5-day maritime exercises, hosted by Indonesia. The

exercises are designed to enhance military ties and interoperability among ASEAN nations. The exercise was focused on non-combat activities such as joint maritime patrols, search and rescue operations, and humanitarian and disaster relief efforts. Despite the emphasis on non-combat exercise, it carries substantial geopolitical implications in light of growing concerns over Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea.<sup>1</sup>

The exercises, named ASEX 01-Natuna, involve participation from troops and warships from Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore. It started on 19<sup>th</sup> September 2023 and till 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2023. ASEAN members have been contending with China's claims in the resource-rich South China Sea, as tensions escalate over disputed area. China's controversial "nine-dash line" claim covers a major portion of the South China Sea, leading to standoffs with neighbouring countries. This exercise is seen as a collective signal from ASEAN nations, demonstrating unity and asserting their role in regional security and peace.<sup>2</sup>

Indonesia, a key ASEAN member and host of the exercises, has been particularly proactive in managing Chinese incursions into its exclusive economic zone, underscoring the strategic importance of safeguarding maritime territories. The Natuna Islands, where the exercises are being conducted, hold significance in the ongoing territorial disputes.<sup>3</sup>

China's growing economic influence in the region poses a challenge for ASEAN nations, influencing their approach to regional security. While attempting to navigate these concerns, the ASEAN aims to project a united front without appearing overtly provocative to China. The military exercises serve this dual purpose of enhancing collective capabilities for regional security while avoiding a direct military confrontation with China. The drills provide an opportunity for the ASEAN to demonstrate unity and cohesion in the face of security threats, showcasing their

ective resolve to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea. China may be worried about this development.

The ASEAN Solidarity Exercise, as it is officially termed, may mark the beginning of annual military exercises within the ASEAN framework, eventually expanding to encompass more comprehensive war drills involving the army, navy, and air force. This step underscores the growing willingness of ASEAN nations to collaborate on regional security matters and could potentially reshape the dynamics of maritime security in the Southeast Asian region. India can work with ASEAN and conduct a joint naval exercise in the South China Sea to sustain peace in the region.



### **Increased Chinese Military Activity Around Taiwan In September 2023**

By Col Vijay Goyat

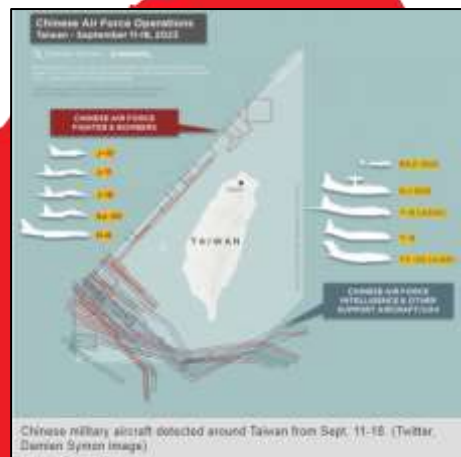


Locations of Chinese military aircraft that intruded on Taiwan's ADIZ on Sept. 18. (MND image)

around Taiwan over 24 hours on 13-14 Sep 2023.<sup>4</sup> These included Chengdu J-10 fighter jets, Sukhoi Su-30 combat jets, two Shaanxi Y-9 aircraft, one BZK-005 reconnaissance drone, and one KJ-500 airborne early warning and control plane. Shenyang J-16 jet fighters Xian Y-20 aerial tankers, and KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft.<sup>5</sup>

Since September 2020, China has increased its use of grey zone tactics by incrementally increasing the number of military aircraft and naval ships operating around Taiwan. Gray zone tactics are defined as "an effort or series of efforts beyond steady-state deterrence and assurance that attempts to achieve one's security objectives without resort to direct and sizable use of force."<sup>6</sup>

These activities took place even as China's top diplomat Wang Yi and U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met for two days in Malta from 16-17 Sep 2023 as part of "ongoing efforts to maintain open lines of communication and responsibly manage the relationship," said the White House. Washington and Beijing described the talks as "candid, substantive, and constructive." It is important to note the fact that China launched a record number of intrusions around Taiwan on 17 Sep 2023 after the meeting. It is either an indicator of a lack of coordination among diplomatic and military policies or a dangerous double-speak.



### **China-Pakistan conducted joint air drills**

By Naman J Anand



Longtime allies Pakistan and China concluded an air exercise which was taking place in Jiuquan, Northwest China's Gansu Province and Yinchuan, Northwest China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. This was the annual bilateral China-Pakistan Joint Air Force Training Exercise titled

Shaheen-X and was attended by PAF's J-10 C and JF-17 fighter aircraft along with the air defence controller and ground crew. Warplanes from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force, included the J-16 fighter jet.<sup>7</sup> Radar and communication systems also took part in the exercise from both sides and replicated common combat situations like cooperative air defence and joint countermeasures. There was an emphasis on interoperability, skills and tactics throughout the exercise. This was the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the joint exercise which began on August 28, 2023, and concluded on 19 September 22, 2023.<sup>8</sup>

This joint exercise indicates a long-term commitment which these two sides share amongst each other. Popularly known as the "Iron Brothers," the joint exercise shows the commitment of the two countries to come to aid in times of crisis. This holds a serious threat to India as it goes on to show that an attack on either Pakistan or China will attract either of the two countries, also this exercise shows the defence preparedness of the two sides as well as the protocols which they might follow in times of war. "This is not only just a joint exercise but is also an opportunity for the two countries to have high-level interactions, potential combined operations involving the armies, navies, and air forces of the two nations, training of troops, and technology collaboration, including cooperative development and sales of armaments" as per Fu Qianshao, a Chinese military aviation expert. This also shows that Pakistan has now moved away from the US for its defence armaments and now relies more on China for its defence procurements. This is also a great opportunity for China for the sale of its weapons. However, it may widen the gap between the military strength of India and Pakistan as most of the Chinese weapons and aircraft are not battle-tested and their credibility is a huge question mark for all. This also gives a chance to India to fill in the gap which is left by Pakistan in the buying of US





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pons. The exercise took place at an altitude of 3,608 feet which shows that the drills conducted were specializing in high altitude warfare which is an area of concern for India as India is having issues with China in the border areas of Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh on one front and if India plans to take Pakistan occupied Kashmir as well which is the Gilgit Baltistan region then too it would have to engage in high altitude warfare which if these two sides are preparing for, calls for the Indian Airforce to prepare for as well.



**Japan Releases Treated Nuclear Waste Water – China's Viewpoint**

By Col Vijay Goyat



Since the 2011 tsunami which severely damaged the plant, more than a million tons of treated wastewater have accumulated at Fukushima. Japan began discharging the treated water on 24 August 2023, in a process that will take 30 years to complete. Despite an endorsement from the UN nuclear

watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the plan has been deeply controversial in Japan with local communities expressing concerns about contamination. Fishing industry groups in Japan and the wider region are also worried about their livelihoods, as they fear consumers will avoid buying seafood.

On the other side, China has criticized the IAEA for being "one-sided". While South Korea's government has said it has no objections to the plan, many of its citizens are opposed to it. Chinese people have shown their displeasure with Japan in recent weeks by protesting in various ways since Japan's release of treated wastewater from the damaged Fukushima nuclear plant into the sea. Scientists largely agree that the impact will be negligible, but China has strongly protested the release. Disinformation has only fuelled fear and suspicion in China.<sup>9</sup> Chinese customs authorities have banned all aquatic products coming from Japan since the wastewater release began, despite being the biggest market for Japanese seafood exports. It remains to be seen how the events unfold over the next 30 years in which this exercise will be completed.

### **China becomes the first country to appoint an ambassador in Afghanistan after the Taliban Takeover**

By Manav Saini





China has appointed Zhao Xing as its ambassador to Afghanistan, becoming the first major nation to establish a functional diplomatic mission in the country since the Taliban retook power in 2021. The Taliban warmly welcomed Ambassador Zhao, signalling China's diplomatic acceptance of the caretaker rulers. The appointment is viewed as part

of China's strategy to increase its influence in the region, particularly given Afghanistan's pivotal position in Beijing's Belt and Road Infrastructure (BRI) initiative. Afghanistan holds substantial natural resources, estimated to be worth around \$1 trillion, including copper, lithium, and gold deposits, which China aims to invest.<sup>10</sup>

China's foreign ministry emphasized a "clear and consistent" policy towards Afghanistan and mentioned that Zhao's appointment follows a "normal rotation" of Chinese ambassadors to Afghanistan. However, no formal indication was given regarding the recognition of the Taliban government. The Taliban said Zhao's appointment was a positive step and an invitation for other nations to engage with their government. While many countries have refrained from recognizing the Taliban due to concerns over human rights violations, China sees maintaining diplomatic ties as essential for both economic and security reasons. Afghanistan's proximity to China's Xinjiang region, where militants have targeted Chinese projects, underscores this importance.<sup>11</sup> It can help China in gaining its influence in the country. Increased influence may help China to protect its investment in Afghanistan.

The presence of a Chinese diplomatic mission in Afghanistan is notable, given that over a hundred nations have yet to officially recognize the Taliban regime. The Taliban's spokesperson emphasized the need for good interactions to foster relations and urged other nations to engage with the Islamic Emirate. As Afghanistan's role in the Belt and Road Initiative gains prominence, the international community will keenly observe developments in the region and the evolving dynamics between China and the Taliban.

### **New China-Nepal new trade route to be opened soon**

By Manav Saini



In recent developments, China has taken significant steps to expand its economic ties with Nepal, particularly through the approval and completion of the Lizi Port, which is a trading facility situated in a Tibetan village on the Nepal-China border. This initiative is part of China's broader aim to enhance connectivity with Nepal. The Lizi

Port, located at an elevation of 4,600 meters, has passed a thorough inspection by the Chinese Commerce Ministry, indicating its readiness for commercial operations.

The Lizi Port is strategically positioned in the village of Lizi, within the Tibetan prefecture of Shigatse, some 935km from Lhasa, Tibet's capital, and 499km from Kathmandu. Historically, Lizi has been a bustling market hub for Himalayan residents, facilitating trade in essential commodities like grain, salt, and goats.

This new trading facility, along with the Nechung facility on the Nepalese side of the border, establishes the Lizi-Nechung route as the fourth trading channel along the extensive China-Nepal border. Moreover, plans for additional trading posts, including Chentang-Kimathanka and Riwu-Olangchung Gola, underscore China's long-term commitment to boosting trade and connectivity between the two nations. Construction of the Lizi Port began in 2017, with an investment of approximately US\$54.7 million. With the reopening of the China-Nepal border after Covid-19 and the resumption of freight transport, the Lizi Port is poised to contribute to Tibet's economic development by enhancing trade and connectivity.

China's engagement with Nepal is not limited to economic ambitions. It is seen within the context of the broader geopolitical landscape, especially concerning the ongoing rivalry with the US. Beijing seeks to limit Indian influence in the region by capitalising on historical events such as the 2015 Indian blockade. The emphasis on Nepal's support for China's stance on international issues, like Hong Kong laws and COVID-19 solidarity, aligns with China's strategy to position itself as a responsible global power while safeguarding its interests. As China becomes more politically assertive in Nepal, its actions and intentions will undoubtedly be scrutinised. The recent developments, notably the completion of the Lizi Port and plans for a Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, reflect China's multifaceted approach aimed at securing economic gains and strengthening geopolitical influence in the strategically significant region between China and India.

**China's high-altitude ultra-high voltage substation with counter-drone system**

By Naman J Anand



In the plateau province of Qinghai in northwest China, a 750 kV ultra-high voltage substation outfitted with a counter-unmanned aircraft system has been put into service at a height of 3,365 meters, the substation, which is a part of the CHN Energy Qinghai Maerdang Hydropower Station, is

located in the Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. It has the ability to detect signals from approaching unmanned aircraft and activate defence mode to stop unidentified drones. It is a smart substation featuring a variety of smart features, including the ability to share data and communicate intelligently with nearby substations and power grid management centres. The voltage grade of the electricity transmission network in the Golog Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai was increased due to the new substation from 330 kV to 750 kV.<sup>12</sup> It can transport roughly 15 billion kWh of clean electricity annually, enabling the development of clean energy and the exploitation of water resources in the upper reaches of the Yellow River. This substation's construction took just 10 months to complete.

This has severe consequences for India. With the deployment of such a high-tech substation which has the capability to detect signals and retaliate against the enemy, it would be difficult for the armed forces to send drones for surveillance and data gathering in case of war. From what it can be seen this is just the beginning of the new era. There are plans for China to develop further such substations along the Indian border and elsewhere in order to further enhance its security while at the same time enhancing the voltage capacity of the grid systems. Not only do such projects allow China to explore water resources in the upper region of the Yellow River but the same can be replicated with the Yangtze River which is shared between India, China and Bangladesh. There is already a conflict between India and China regarding the sharing of water and if China further exploits the upper region of the Yangtze River, then it can have a serious water crisis for India and Bangladesh.

### **Xi Jinping meets Nepalese PM in China**

By Naman J Anand

On 23, September 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Nepalese Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda in Hangzhou, the provincial capital of Zhejiang Province in eastern China. The objective of the meeting was not specified. This would be a week-long visit for the Nepali Prime Minister after he accepted the invitation of his counterpart Li Qiang. PM Prachanda will go to the 19th Asian Games opening ceremony in Hangzhou, the provincial capital of Zhejiang, the Chinese Foreign Ministry also announced. PM Prachanda and Premier Li Qiang are also anticipated to have a bilateral summit. PM Prachanda is accompanied by a high-level team that includes Foreign Minister Narayan Prakash Saud, his daughter Ganga Dahal, and other cabinet members. During his visit on September 23-30, 2023, PM Prachanda will also pay a visit to Chongqing Municipality to observe agriculture and industrial progress in China, as well as to Lhasa, a city in the Tibet Autonomous Region of southwest China. Throughout the meeting, Xi Jinping emphasized that China places a high value on its connections with Nepal and is willing to strengthen its development strategy alignment with the country in order to foster ongoing growth in those relations. He also praised Prime Minister Prachanda's commitment to promoting friendly ties and support for cooperation in the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>13</sup>

This has severe implications for India, Nepal closer to China has a severe security concern for India. Since India shares a long and porous land border with Nepal which can not only allow criminals and terrorists to find safe haven but also allow China to better help the anti-India activities which it supports in various parts of our country. Nepal, which is part of the Belt and Road initiative can allow China to easily gain access to India through the infrastructure which it would be developing in Nepal. Another area of concern is that since most of the countries who have become a part of the BRI project have become unable to repay the loans they have taken from China for the infrastructure and have therefore lost key highways, railways, airports etc., the same can happen with Nepal as well which would result in another unstable neighbour for India in the neighbourhood. China can also very easily now further exploit the anti-India sentiment which exists in Nepal and this would result in India not only losing a buffer state between itself and China but also in the tilt of the regional balance of power in China's favour. India needs to be vary of the growing Nepal-China friendship and cooperation and needs to step up in its efforts to help Nepal with their needs and trading requirements. It also needs to ensure that Nepal gets easy access to one of the Indian ports since Nepal is a landlocked nation and this is the major weakness which China is currently exploiting and offering a solution to Nepal through the BRI network. India needs to look carefully at this meeting as it has future implications for the security of India and the region as a whole.

## Endnotes

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Col Vijay Goyat was commissioned in the Corps of Engineers in Dec 1997. An alumnus of NDA Khadakwasla, his educational qualifications include B Tech, MSc (Def Tech) and MBA. The Officer has served in varied terrain pan India as well as being a Military Observer in Ivory Coast. He commanded an Engineer Regt in the Desert and North-East Sector and an Engineer Stores Depot at Delhi Cantt. His staff appointments include GSO1 in Army HQs and Col GS(IS) in a Corps. The Officer has rich experience in the construction of strategic infrastructure in North East and Eastern Ladakh. The Officer has been awarded a COAS Commendation Card thrice during his service so far. He is currently pursuing a Research Fellowship from USI on 'Civil-Military Fusion: A Way Ahead in Building Infrastructure Along Northern Borders'.

**Mr Manav Saini**

Manav Saini is currently serving as a Research Assistant at the Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (CS3) within the esteemed United Service Institution of India (USI). He holds a Master of Arts degree in International Relations from South Asian University, along with a Bachelor's degree in Journalism & Mass Communications from Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University. Prior to his current role, Manav gained valuable experience as a Research Intern at the National Maritime Foundation for 6 months, where he actively participated in their teaching program covering a wide range of facets within the maritime domain. He has been invited by Harvard University for their conference on Harvard Project for Asia and International Relations in February 2023 in Massachusetts, USA. His research interests primarily revolve around maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region, multilateral organisations and China's foreign policy and its role within this significant area.



**Mr Naman J Anand**



Naman Anand is a graduate with a masters in diplomacy, law, and business from O.P. Jindal Global University with a specialisation in economics and foreign policy. His areas of interest are Latin America, drug trafficking, energy politics, and the politics of East Asia.





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