



Project GAIA

Open-Source
Global Conflict Analysis Report

December 2023



In focus this issue:

Sudan | Japan | Philippines | Vietnam



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State of Project GAIA

in December 2023

Since Project GAIA's inception in October 2023, we have conducted many planning meetings where students collaboratively determine the project's scope. The nature of our desired product has also evolved several times, shifting from geographical, event, to subject focus. This report is our inaugural publication of student-led open-source analysis, and it serves as a pilot experiment in shaping student-driven open-source projects. We are prepared to adapt and refine our approach as we gain clearer insights into our evolving vision.

We extend our gratitude to the faculty at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs for their mentorship and to the various field experts who served as guest speakers, sharing their invaluable expertise. The guidance we received has been instrumental in our swift progress. Our special thanks go to the Cybersecurity Specialization program at NPSIA, which not only served as the crucible where most of our students met but also laid the foundation that made this project a reality. While these relationships are neither affiliations nor endorsements, the support and insights offered have been essential to our journey.

Our current design focus encompasses three areas:



Building Experimental Learning



Enhancement through Artificial Intelligence



Production with a Smaller Footprint

The details of these processes will be discussed in our 2023 Process Design Report releasing later this month. The report will delve into the planning and concept of operations behind our student-led open-source project. We appreciate your interest in our work and invite you to stay tuned for further updates.

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Darfur

Challenges related to the displacement crisis

By Leah Adoni and Charles Beaton, MENA Analysts (GAIA:MENA|E05)

BLUF

The escalating displacement crisis in El Fasher and Wad Medani, exacerbated by food insecurity, institutional instability in Khartoum, and the informal economy, is set to worsen with the impending end of the UNAMID mission in 2024, unless a resolution for control over the capital and key agricultural hubs is reached.

Background

The Darfur region in Sudan, home to over 80 ethnic groups, became a conflict zone in 2003 with the Justice and Equality Movement's (JEM) armed protest against economic disparities.

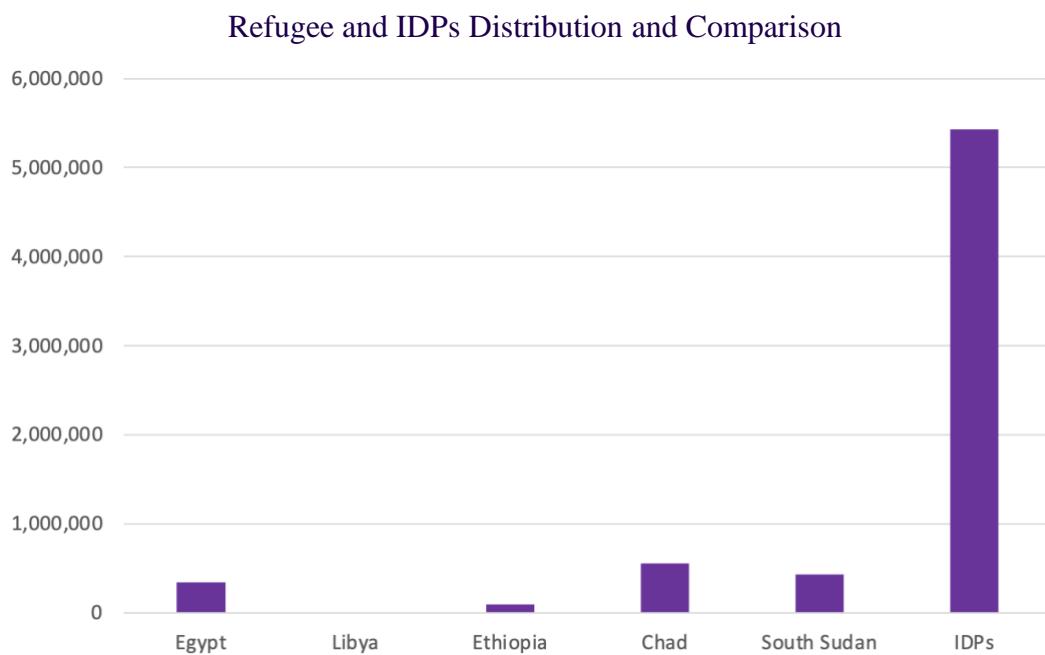
President Omar al-Bashir's military response resulted in massive casualties and displacement,¹ leading to his indictment by the International Criminal Court.² Today, the conflict persists primarily between the paramilitant Rapid Support Force³ (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). This struggle, intensified by a faltering democratic transition and a military coup, centers on controlling the nation's major institutions and resources like oil and agriculture,⁴ with key figures like Generals Hemedti (RSF) and Al-Burhan⁵ (SAF) at the forefront.

IDP situation

Currently, there are 9 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, and 4,000 have been killed due to ethnic persecution. As of December 13, 2023, most refugees have fled to Chad and South Sudan, with Egypt, Libya, and Ethiopia accounting for less than half of the totalⁱ refugee

ⁱ According to UNOCHA, the total number of refugees in Egypt, Libya, and Ethiopia stands at 343,230, 4,827, and 94,250 respectively, while 555,255 have fled to Chad and 432,800 to South Sudan.

population.⁶ This number is overshadowed by IDPs, totaling 5,424,772, with the majority moving to the capital, Khartoum, due to the availability of essential goods.⁷ As fighting intensifies in Khartoum, IDPs are fleeing south to El Fasher and Wad Madani, two major agricultural hubs in Sudan that are also experiencing heavy fighting as both the RSF and SAF vie for control over agricultural products. In the short to medium term, acute food insecurity is expected to escalate from a crisis to an emergency,⁸ potentially increasing the number of people in need of food aid to between 10 and 12 million.⁹



Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.¹⁰

Special populations

Sudan is currently facing the world's largest displacement crisis, with 349,000 children having left their homes between September 30 and November 15. This number is expected to rise due to food shortages.¹¹ Regarding the risk of GBV (Gender-Based Violence), including rape and conflict-related sexual violence, UNICEF has identified 21 credible reports involving at least 57 women and girls as of July 11, 2023. The actual number of unreported incidents is likely much higher. Furthermore, incidents of sexual exploitation are positively correlated with ongoing food instability, as evidenced by previous conflicts in the region.¹²

Shortages of goods and services

Shortages of goods and services in Sudan stem from inadequate transport infrastructure, with most highways intersecting major cities where food shortages and armed conflict are prevalent. This is particularly evident in routes passing through El Fasher in the west and Wad Medani in the east, both crucial choke points for agricultural exports.¹³ In Nyala, there has been a dramatic increase in the prices of domestic and imported food, with wheat flour, oil, and tomato paste becoming luxury commodities.¹⁴ This is highlighted by the 250% increase in sugar prices since April 2023.¹⁵ Fuel costs, a significant factor in affordability, have led to a 50-300% rise in local bus and tuk-tuk fares,¹⁶ the primary transportation modes for Sudanese people. With Khartoum being the central hub of the highway infrastructure, supply chains are highly centralized. Most commercial trucks must pass through the capital to reach other cities, which means that increased hostilities in Khartoum directly impact the availability of supplies, even in remote regions.¹⁷

Economic impact

After South Sudan's secession in 2012, Sudan's oil exports were significantly impacted.¹⁸ The country potentially loses revenue from 2.67 million tons of oil through the Al Khair terminal in the northeast.¹⁹ This port has the capacity to export crude oil worth USD 337 billion annually at a rate of USD 71.02 per barrel.²⁰ However, control of Khartoum is vital for transporting, exporting, and trading oil on the global market,²¹ as the pipeline runs through the capital. Oil production in Sudan has decreased, dropping from 845,600 tons per month in the pre-war year to 642,084 tons per month in October and November 2023.²² This reduction represents a loss of USD 14,453,706.32 in revenue. Additionally, if the Al Khair terminal, one of the SAF's last strongholds, were to be bombed, it could result in a further loss of USD 45,600,805.68.²³

Assessment

The displacement crisis in El Fasher and Wad Medani is expected to worsen due to ongoing food insecurity, as these cities are key agricultural hubs for rural populations. In Khartoum, contested control has led to a lack of proper management in institutions like banks, crucial for oil exportation on the global market. This has resulted in a predominantly informal economy. The absence of a central authority to maintain order and control over essential banking institutions, oil pipelines, and agricultural prices, including imported products, forces citizens to flee to more rural areas, which lack adequate policing resources. Consequently, as the UNAMID mission concludes in 2024, the situation is anticipated to deteriorate further in the coming months, until one of the Generals establishes control over both the capital and these vital agricultural hubs.

Kalayaan Islands

Philippines' response to China's gray zone tactics

By Francis Obeso, Indo-Pacific Analyst (GAIA:INPA)\E05

BLUF

The escalating tensions in the South China Sea are defined by China's aggressive gray zone tactics and expansive territorial claims, against which the Philippines' responses range from limited multilateral diplomacy to strategic alignment with the United States.

Background

China, using its nine-dash line map, claims the entire Spratly chain of islands in the South China Sea (SCS). Meanwhile, the Philippines claims parts of this group, known as the Kalayaans, within its Exclusive Economic Zone, based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.²⁴

China's tactics in the Kalayaan Islands

China employs gray zone operations in the South China Sea, actions that fall within the ambiguous realm between peace and war.²⁵ A notable strategy is the “Scarborough Model,”²⁶ named after a 2012 incident at Scarborough Shoal involving Chinese fishing vessels carrying illegal and endangered items, intercepted by the Philippine Navy.²⁷ Beijing responded with a mix of diplomatic, administrative, and economic measures, alongside cyber activities, to support its military actions and displace the Philippine Navy without escalating to outright war.²⁸

China's gray zone activities have intensified, evidenced by the creation of at least three militarized artificial islands in the region.²⁹ These developments have significantly enhanced China's capacity for coercive military gray zone operations.³⁰ Other tactics include diplomatic

leverage, economic pressure, and cyberattacks. For instance, China pressured Cambodia to prevent joint critical statements against it at the 2012 and 2016 ASEAN summits.³¹ Beijing also intermittently restricts tourism to the Philippines when tensions in the South China Sea flare up³² and continuously harasses fishermen in the area,³³ leading to fatalities.³⁴ Notably, cyberattacks have coincided with major developments in the region, such as the 2016 Sea Remote Access Trojan program directed at the law firm dealing with the case against China at The Hague.³⁵

In recent years, China has escalated its harassment in the South China Sea. This includes using coast guard ships' water cannons and swarming tactics against Philippine boats in 2021,³⁶ and again in August and December of this year,³⁷ to disrupt resupply missions. A recent significant incident involved a collision between boats from each nation.³⁸

Philippines' response

The Philippines has attempted a multilateral approach to address the South China Sea issues, mainly through engagement with ASEAN, the EU, and the ICJ. However, ASEAN, as an organization, faces limitations due to its decision-making process; a single veto from a member state, some with closer ties to China, can block a proposal, reflecting varied national interests.³⁹ The EU's delegation to the Philippines has expressed support for a rules-based maritime order in the region,⁴⁰ yet it fell short in substantive calls to action. The ICJ's ruling for the SCS found that the nine-dash line had no legal foundation; however, enforcement of this ruling is lacking.⁴¹

The Philippines' strategy also involves close collaboration with the United States to counter China's assertiveness. This alignment, however, has varied depending on the Philippine administration. For instance, during Duterte's presidency, the Philippines leaned more toward China's influence.⁴² In contrast, under the Marcos administration, the Philippines has been a "star ally in Asia"⁴³ for the US.

Assessment

Tensions in the SCS are likely to persist unless there is a substantive resolution of the territorial claims, involving not only China and the Philippines but also all other claimants of the islands. China's gray zone tactics, exemplified by the Scarborough Shoal Model, have proven effective and are likely to serve as a template for future operations. Consequently, states should anticipate a blend of diplomatic, administrative, cyber, and military measures in response to Chinese claims over the islands. Given the current institutional constraints of ASEAN and the EU, multilateral responses are expected to remain fragmented and limited. Meanwhile, the United States will continue to be a crucial ally and security guarantor in the region, making the Philippines' diplomatic stance towards the US pivotal in maintaining the status quo.

Senkaku Islands

Strategic Stalemate between China and Japan

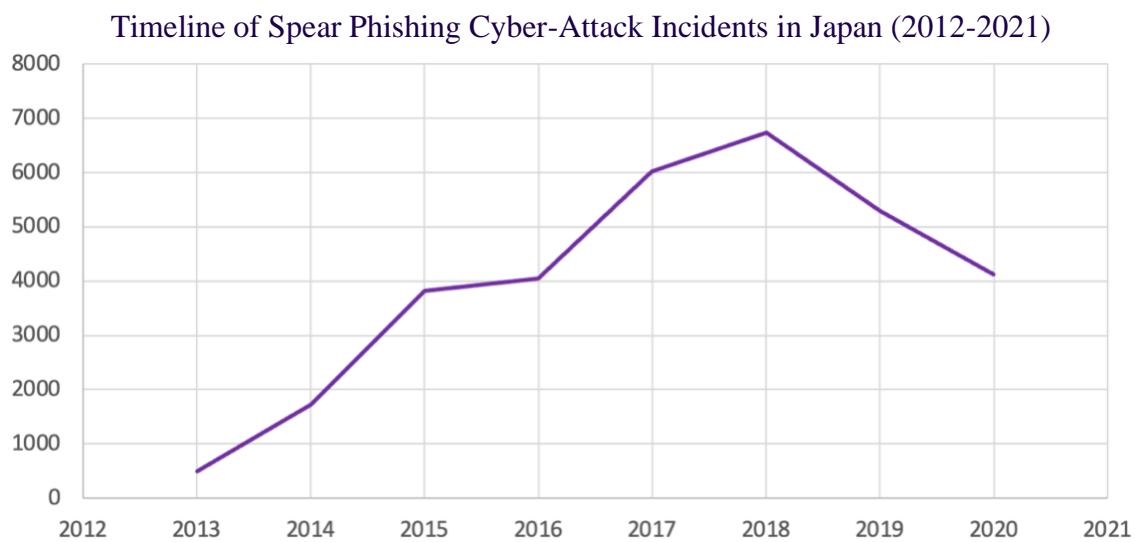
By Daniel Finger and Jean-Christophe Taillandier, Indo-Pacific Analysts (GAIA:INPA\|E05)

BLUF

The Senkaku Islands dispute is expected to remain unresolved in the near future, with China intensifying its incursions and Japan seeking Indo-Pacific alliances. A divided ASEAN is unlikely to fully align against China's actions.

Background

China is challenging sovereignty over islands in the East China Sea over what it calls the Diaoyu Islands, against Japan which calls it the Senkaku islands. China today argues ownership, using documents dating the Ming dynasty (circa 1561).⁴⁴ Japan's argument is that the islands became *res nullius* when it incorporated it to its Okinawa prefecture in 1895.⁴⁵ Following Japanese government 2012 nationalization of the Senkaku islands, air and sea incursions by China went from near zero to hundreds per week.⁴⁶ In cyberspace, from 2013 to 2017 cyber-attacks increased 8-fold.



Source: Japan National Police Agency, Cyber Affairs Bureau.⁴⁷

Chinese Tactics

To claim the Senkaku Islands, China utilizes campaigns characterized as "strategic gradualism", using calculated grey-zone tactics to overturn elements of the status-quo and assert Chinese claims over the islands without triggering escalation. This involves the slow accumulation of small changes or actions which degrade the defender's threats of deterrence, since such small actions are unlikely to trigger a disproportionate response. The long-term goal is a change of the status quo. This practice is attractive to China's revisionist strategic culture to indirectly achieve strategic goals without decisive and costly actions and remains consistent with other Chinese claims in the South China Sea. The intended effect on Japan is to make their interests in the islands less significant, increase the risk of potential escalation, constrain the response tools available to Japan, or a combination of all. This is a difficult strategy for formal or informal alliances such as ASEAN to counteract without agreement on how threatening each incremental move is and how to respond.⁴⁸

Japanese Response

The dispute over the islands has, in general, soured relations with Beijing. Japan answered by deepening alignment with the West through reconfirmation of alliances with the United States and multilateral partnerships such as the Quad, upgrading of ties of Vietnam, and ASEAN. The end goal seems to be to convince regional countries to join its "free and open Indo-Pacific" policy.⁴⁹

Japan also reinterpreted its constitution article 9 in 2014 and amended major security documents that were limiting its military capabilities.⁵⁰ Tokyo is making sure it has the tools to answer in kind to any moves by Beijing that challenges its sovereignty over the islands and shows no sign of willingness to back down or even negotiate over the islands.

Assessment

The Chinese government is unlikely to back down from its claim on the islands. In similar challenges it has shown disregard for international law as an arbitration mechanism. In addition, Chinese leaders are now constrained by nationalistic domestic forces that would not accept to give up territory, not dissimilar to the situation of Taiwan.⁵¹ Therefore, we also expect with moderate confidence that in the next decade a gradual escalation of the frequency and intensity of Chinese grey-zone tactics to assert their territorial claims. We have a high degree of confidence that Japan will continue to respond to any challenges by China over the sovereignty of the Senkaku islands and that these challenges will not escalate to open conflict, seemingly the only successful tactic found so far.

Therefore, Japan will likely work hard to bring local ASEAN countries on its side to show a united front against Chinese assertive behavior, with ultimate backing from the United States. A divided ASEAN is however not likely to align fully with Japan on this issue if there is no agreement on the degree of threat and appropriate response that each escalation in Chinese grey-zone tactics should be met with.

Vietnam

Military reaction to Chinese expansionism

By Shivana Mohammed, Indo-Pacific Analyst (GAIA:INPA\EO5)

BLUF

China's consistent use of grey zone tactics and "cartographic invasion" signals their intent to continue expansion into the South China Sea. As a result, Vietnam has been forced to build up their military and naval capabilities whilst trying to continue diplomatic avenues of conflict resolution.

Background

China claims nearly all of the South China Sea within its "nine-dash" line,⁵² encompassing the Spratly and Paracel Islands, which Vietnam asserts as part of its exclusive economic zone.⁵³ Despite China's rhetoric of restraint and willingness to settle disputes with neighbors, its actions signal increasing expansion and intent to exert control over economic activities within the "nine-dash line."⁵⁴

Use of grey zone tactics

China consistently engages in activities that blur the lines of international law, such as land reclamation and mobilizing armed patrol fleets.⁵⁵ Currently, China maintains twenty outposts in the Paracel Islands and seven in the Spratly Islands, equipped with military infrastructure and personnel.⁵⁶ The increasing presence of armed fleets, supported by a substantial fisher militia, polices and often harasses civilian Vietnamese fishermen.⁵⁷

Cartographic invasion

China utilizes the practice of launching provocative information right before international summits. The Ministry of Natural Resources issued the “China Standard Map Edition 2023” before the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and G20 Summits which showed a “ten-dash line”, indicating an increase in territorial claims.⁵⁸ This signals China’s intention to keep this issue at the forefront and to remind both the neighbouring countries and the world, of the seriousness in their claims.

Vietnam’s response

Building up Defence Capabilities – Vietnam has recognized the need to improve their defence capabilities to maintain their autonomy.⁵⁹ They have increased air and naval forces to have sufficient forms of deterrence after a series of major at-sea incidents. As a result, their most recent defence white paper⁶⁰ states that the country is open to “strategic partnerships.”⁶¹ They have also been continuously developing reefs in the Spratly islands through land reclamation as a way to bolster their claims.⁶²

Prioritizing Diplomatic Relationships – Whilst Vietnam has built up their defence, they are still primarily interested in pursuing diplomacy to resolve disputes. Vietnam is a middle power whose military and navy forces could be relatively easy to defeat considering their lack of sea fighting experience.⁶³ Thus, it is important to exhaust all methods of diplomacy before potentially entering an armed conflict.

Assessment

China's seriousness about maintaining control within the “nine-dash line” is illustrated by their consistent use of grey zone tactics and “cartographic invasion”. The increasing aggression of patrols and land reclamation points to a pattern of “salami-slicing” that uses a series of incremental actions to gradually change the status quo in their favour.⁶⁴ Contrastingly, Vietnam’s improvement of their defence capabilities and prioritization of diplomatic measures shows a pattern of preparation for the worst-case scenario whilst pursuing to their best abilities, a peaceful resolution.

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⁶³ Derek Grossman, "Why Vanguard Bank and Why Now? Explaining Chinese Behavior in the South China Sea," August 19, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2019/08/why-vanguard-bank-and-why-now-explaining-chinese-behavior.html>.

⁶⁴ Houlden, Romaniuk, and Hong, *Security, Strategy and Military Dynamics in the South China Sea*, 70.

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Project GAIA is one of the student-driven programs facilitated through CASR. The project is designed to offer open-source analysis training to our student analysts. And it focuses on documenting the organizing and methodological process of experimental open-source practices.

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