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CHINA OPPOSES U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN NORTH PHILIPPINES

Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong has expressed China's opposition to the expanded U.S. military presence in the northern Philippines during talks with Filipino Foreign Undersecretary Theresa Lazaro. The bilateral meetings are the first since Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. took office last June. A statement by the PRC Embassy in Manila warned that security cooperation with the U.S. "will drag the Philippines into the abyss of geopolitical strife and damage its economic development." Marcos has announced that rotating batches of U.S. forces will be stationed indefinitely at four military sites in the country's north not far from Taiwan. The deployments come in addition to five bases designated under a 2014 defense pact between the treaty allies. Manila and Washington plan to extend that agreement, which would permit the presence of U.S. forces and equipment in the country for at least another 10 more years. (Associated Press, March 23, 2023)

CHINA, CAMBODIA HOLD FIRST NAVAL DRILLS

Last month, China reopened its borders to tourists and resumed issuing all types of visas to help revive the nation's economy following a three-year pause during the COVID-19 pandemic. China is the last major country to reopen its borders, an announcement that came only after it declared a "decisive victory" over COVID-19 back in February. A Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that China had "optimized measures for remote testing of people coming to China from relevant countries," allowing pre-boarding antigen testing instead of nucleic acid testing. The relaxation of visa rules follows China's approval of outbound group tours for Chinese citizens. (Al Jazeera, March 20, 2023)

PRC FIRM WINS SOLOMON ISLANDS PORT PROJECT TENDER

The Solomon Islands has awarded a multi-million-dollar contract to upgrade an international port in Honiara to China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC). The port deal is part of a \$170 million project funded by the Asian Development Bank to upgrade roads and wharves. CCECC was awarded the roads contract last year. "This will be upgrading the old international port in Honiara and two domestic wharves in the provinces," said Mike Qaqara, an official at the Solomons' infrastructure development ministry. This week, delegations from both Beijing and Washington visited Honiara. Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare met the vice chairman of the China International Development Cooperation Agency and signed on to China's Global Development Initiative. Sogavare also held a "strategic dialogue" with Kurt Campbell, the Indo-Pacific coordinator of the U.S. National Security Council. (Reuters, March 21, 2023)

CHINA CRITICIZES U.S. PLAN TO FORCE TIKTOK SALE

China opposes U.S. plans to force TikTok's Chinese owner to sell the short-video service. "China will resolutely oppose it," said a Ministry of Commerce spokesperson. A forced sale "would seriously damage investors from multiple countries including China" and hurt "confidence to invest in the U.S." The comments came just before TikTok's CEO, Shou Zi Chew, appeared before a Congressional committee. Lawmakers are considering banning TikTok if parent company ByteDance doesn't sell it. Meanwhile, Norway has become the latest country to ban TikTok from all government devices. "The decision is in line with the recommendation of the Norwegian National Security Authority," parliament speaker Masud Gharakhani said, adding the app should be removed "as quickly as possible." (Associated Press, March 23, 2023)

LESS THAN 400 U.S. STUDENTS IN CHINA

The number of American university students in China fell to its lowest level in more than two decades-382 students in the 2020-21 academic year, down 97% from roughly 12,000 in 2018-19. The peak was decade ago at nearly 15,000. "The golden age when many American students came to China is gone," says David Moser, an American who helped develop study-abroad programs at Washington-based CET Academic Programs. CET suspended its China programs in January 2020, in part because the PRC has been slow to grant student visas. The number of Chinese studying in the U.S. also has dropped, albeit to a lesser extent. During the 2020-21 academic year, there were 318,000 Chinese students at U.S. universities-down 14% from two years earlier. (Wall Street Journal, March 18, 2023)