



# **RCAS Commentary**

## **China Speeds up Its “Look West” Strategy**

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## About RCAS

RCAS is a non-profit research organization focusing on the maritime issues and regional integration in the Indo-Pacific region. It is a newly-established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng, in Haikou, China. We, at the moment, have an international research team with resident/non-resident researchers from China and other Asian states.

RCAS seizes the opportunity that China is building Hainan Free-Trade Port in which the Hainan Island will become an important window for China's opening up to the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean to become a leading research institute and think tank on maritime affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. So far, RCAS focuses on the maritime disputes and maritime cooperation in the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, and various regional cooperation mechanisms such as BRI, LMC, RCEP and so on. It is committed to promoting the maritime cooperation, regional integration and academic exchanges in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has received a number of research funding from universities and foundations, and conducted research programs of the South China Sea(SCS) dispute, China-South/Southeast Asian relations, BRI in South/Southeast Asia, terrorism/anti-terrorism in Afghanistan, and so on. RCAS researchers have won various awards from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and the Hainan government.

RCAS has published nearly 10 books in Chinese and English, and more than 20 papers on SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *International Pressures, Strategic Preference and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988*(Singapore: Springer Nature, 2020); *A Preliminary Study on the Foreign Policy of the New Pakistani Government*(2022); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches*(2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988*(2021); *The Budding Indo-Myanmar Relations: Rising But Limited Challenges for China*(2019).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles and been interviewed in various local and international media outlets such as Asia Centre in France, *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum(EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Lian He Zao Bao* and *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post(SCMP)* and *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN* and *Global Times* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the US, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places. Welcome to visit our website: <http://www.rcas.top>.

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In September, Chinese President Xi Jinping chose Central Asia as the destination for his first trip abroad since January 2020. Soon after Xi’s Central Asia tour, where he visited Kazakhstan and attended at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization(SCO) summit in Uzbekistan, Chinese Vice President Wang Qishan rushed to Kazakhstan to attend the sixth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia(CICA). The back-to-back high-ranking visits by Chinese top leaders to Central Asian states underscore the rapid rise in China’s emphasis on national security on its western periphery especially in the new context of the intensified Russia-Ukraine conflict.

As early as the foundation of the SCO in 2001, some Chinese scholars argued that China should have two parallel “Look East” and “Look West” strategies, meaning that Beijing would maintain peace and stability at the East Sea and South China Sea while consolidating its western periphery. To the West, border disputes with India and terrorism in Xinjiang and the neighbouring Central Asia composed the two major security challenges to China. Since the founding of the SCO, China’s influence in Central Asia and its relations with Central Asian neighbors have expanded immensely. Meanwhile, terrorist threats from Central Asia have been severely undermined and economic cooperation between China and the Central Asian countries has also been greatly promoted.

Now, against the new background of intensified China-U.S. strategic competition and the escalated Russia-Ukraine conflict, the geostrategic importance of Central Asia has been further enhanced. Some analysts believe that Russia’s traditional influence in Central Asia is bound to be weakened amid attrition in the Russia-Ukraine war. At the same time, the United States has taken the opportunity to speed up the pace of cooperation with the Central Asian states. This forces China to upgrade its relationship with the Central Asian states through bilateral and multilateral channels. On one hand, top Chinese leaders toured Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to strengthen cooperation with the major partners in Central Asia; on the other hand, China

supported the expansion of SCO so as to guide the development of this key regional cooperation mechanism. In this way, China can not only reduce the strategic squeeze brought by the United States but avoid the risk of being “wrapped up” by the United States on both its east coast and western frontier.

China has increased its presence in Central Asia through two main actions: improving the physical connectivity between China and its Central Asian neighbors and supported the construction of an effective multilateral security mechanism in the region.

Even before Xi officially proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt in 2013, there were many calls for the restoration of the ancient overland Silk Road, in which Central Asia was a significant junction between China and Europe. For the same reason, Xi emphasized the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway during his Central Asia tour last month. With two other cross-border railways in the works-linking China to Pakistan and Nepal-it’s apparent that China is trying connect its western frontier with the neighbouring countries in Central Asia and South Asia. The main aim is to restore the glory of the Silk Road and bring prosperity to the region.

With the launch of such connectivity projects, however, some security issues have emerged. China has placed its response to security threats at the heart of SCO on one hand; on the other hand, it supported CICA. Wang’s attendance at the sixth summit of CICA is the last action taken by China to accelerate multilateral security cooperation in the region.

In 1992, Kazakhstan’s then President Nursultan Nazarbayev advocated for the establishment of the CICA conference. So far, CICA has 27 member states, eight observer states, and five international organizations with observer status. The organization’s secretaries is located in the capital of Kazakhstan, and its membership largely includes countries in West, Central, and South Asia.

This year, Kazakhstan that holds the rotating presidency. It seized the importance chance of China’s expansion in Central Asia and strengthened the multilateral security cooperation with China within CICA, so as to further enhance the influence of conference as well as the capability of Central Asian states to safeguard the national security. China, of course, is very glad to see CICA play a larger role in consolidating defense cooperation within the member states and

maintaining peace and stability in the region. Xi advanced this vision back in 2014, when China hosted the fourth CICA summit.

For along time, the United States has courted Central Asian states through economic and defense cooperation as well as political engagement, in part intending to contain China and Russia's influence in the region. Central Asian states don't want to be forced into any country's "zero-sum game" in which they must choose between partners. Central Asian countries in the geopolitical vortex increasingly attach importance to promoting multilateral security mechanisms based on mutual trust.

To conclude, China's pace of "Looking West" will be significantly accelerated through deepening physical connectivity and supporting CICA in the region. In the near future, China will seek to play a bigger role in Central Asia.

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## About Author



Nian Peng is the Director at Research Centre for Asian Studies, Haikou, China. He holds a Ph.D. in Government and International Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. His main research interests are in the areas of China-Southeast/South Asia relations, Belt and Road Initiative(BRI) and maritime security of the Indo-Pacific. He authored/edited six books-*The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-power Rivalry*(Springer Nature, forthcoming), *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives*(Springer Nature, 2022), *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*(Springer Nature, 2021), *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic*(Springer Nature, 2021), *International Pressures, Strategic Preference, and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988* (Springer Nature, 2020) and *Leng Zhan Hou Yin Mian Guan Xi Yan Jiu [A Study on Indo-Myanmar Relations after the Cold-War]*(Shi Shi Chu Ban She [Current Affairs Press], 2017). His refereed articles have been notably published in *Ocean Development and International Law*, *Pacific Focus*, *Asian Affairs*, *Dong Nan Ya Yan Jiu [Southeast Asian Studies]*, *Nan Ya Yan Jiu [South Asian Studies]* and *Nan Ya Yan Jiu Ji Kan [South Asian Studies Quarterly]*. He also contributes his perspectives to many think tanks and various local and international media outlets such as Asia Centre in France, *East Asian Forum* in Australia, *The Diplomat* in the USA, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Lian He Zao Bao* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post* and *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *Global Times* and *CGTN* in China.