



## **RCAS Talk**

### **When China and the United States Meet in the “Asian Moment”, Can ASEAN Maintain Its Independence?**

Nian Peng

Director, Research Centre for Asian Studies(RCAS), China

November 21, 2022

Address: No.179, Yangshan Road, Qiongsan District, Haikou, China

ZIP Code: 571100|Email: pengnian@hainnu.edu.cn|Web: [www.rcas.top](http://www.rcas.top)

## 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, 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 *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*(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); *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>.

# **When China and the United States Meet in the “Asian Moment”, Can ASEAN Maintain Its Independence?**

*Nian Peng*

From November 8 to 19, Southeast Asia entered the “highlight moment”. During these 12 days, Southeast Asian countries will host three large-scale regional and international summits, and leaders from all over the world will gather together to discuss the “world’s affairs”. As Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, global governance has entered the “Asian moment”.



▲Xi Jinping met with Joe Biden

Southeast Asia begins its official “summit season” this week. The first of its kind was a series of meetings of East Asian cooperation leaders held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from November 8 to 13; the G20 Summit will be held in Bali, Indonesia, from 15th to 16th. The Asia-Pacific

Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Informal Meeting was held in Bangkok, Thailand from 18th to 19th.

Chinese government officials began their first post-pandemic trip to Southeast Asia this week. Chinese President Xi Jinping personally attended the G20 Summit and APEC Summit. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Cambodia from November 8 to 13 and attended the China-ASEAN (10+1) Leaders' Meeting, the ASEAN-China-Japan-South Korea (10+3) Summit and the East Asia Summit.

On the eve of the meeting, Wang Yi said in a phone call with Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian that China hopes that ASEAN countries will take the recent series of summits as an opportunity to make the “Asian moment” provide more certainty and stability to the world and play an “Asian role” in coping with world chaos and changes.

What is the “Asian role”? **Nian Peng, Director of Research Centre for Asian Studies(RCAS),** China, analyzed in an interview with *Hong Kong China News Agency* on November 9th that the current global situation is turbulent, and the risk of geopolitical competition and even nuclear war has increased significantly, which also brings security risks to the Asian region. Under such circumstances, on the one hand, only by self-unity, maintaining regional stability and easing global tensions can countries in the region create an external environment for sustained prosperity and lay a solid foundation for the development of all countries. On the other hand, in response to the risks faced by the all countries, Europe and the United States have not come up with a good solution. Asian countries in the face of the pressure of the United States “choose sides”, still maintain a relatively moderate situation. There are some positive practices, if can be systematically refined and promoted globally, it is also of great significance to the world.

The relationship between China and ASEAN is very close. In November 2021, China and ASEAN officially announced the establishment of China-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic

Partnership. ASEAN is China's largest trading partner, and China is also ASEAN's largest trading partner. Chinese leaders have attended the China-ASEAN Summit and the ASEAN-China-Japan-South Korea Summit for 24 consecutive years, and the East Asia Summit for 16 consecutive years. There is a view that China's current diplomatic strategic focus has been firmly focused on Asia.

Nian Peng pointed out that economically, there is no doubt that China and ASEAN cooperate closely in trade and investment, especially after the epidemic, the two sides have more room for economic cooperation. Under the rising pressure of the United States' "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" and its efforts of promoting the "decoupling" of the global supply chain from China, China has strong motivation to build a highly stable industrial chain with ASEAN state, which will be of great significance to its future foreign trade and economic development, as well as to promote the implementation of its dual circulation between domestic and international market.

Regarding the reason why China's current diplomatic strategy focuses on Asia is, Nian Peng added that first of all, because China's diplomatic tradition attaches importance to peripheral diplomacy, especially Southeast Asia and South Asia, which are not only important regions for China's economic and trade cooperation, but also the preferred region for China's border stability. In addition, the United States has recently invested more and more geostrategic resources around China, constantly destabilized the South China Sea and criticized the BRI, trying to drive a wedge between China and its neighboring countries. If China's relations with ASEAN countries deteriorate, the United States will have a good chance to intervene in the territorial dispute in the SCS, and even military intervention.

Since taking office, U.S. President Joe Biden has repeatedly expressed his importance to Southeast Asia and revealed his intention to "return to Southeast Asia". U.S. officials in charge of Indo-Pacific affairs have said that in the past, they only contacted ASEAN countries occasionally, but now they do so once a month. According to the White House, Biden will also travel to Southeast Asia and will participate in the U.S.-ASEAN Leaders' Summit and the East

Asia Summit, as well as the G20 summit. US media reports described Biden's trip as to expand US influence and "counterbalance China."

In this regard, Nian Peng said that the United States has high expectations for ASEAN countries in this meeting, hopes to develop positive relations with the United States, and there will certainly be more aspects to target China, including openly and covertly playing up the "China threat" card, hyping up the "debt trap", and encouraging ASEAN countries to "contend with China". The United States has its own purpose in this trip, not really for the sake of Southeast Asian countries.

The ASEAN countries are becoming main centers for Sino-US strategic competition, can they adhere to the independent "ASEAN Way"?

Nian Peng believes that ASEAN's principle of not "taking sides" is consistent and must be adhered to. First, ASEAN is geographically closest to China and cannot afford to take sides; Second, ASEAN is highly depended on Chinese economy, and the loss of the Chinese market will cause immeasurable losses to the future economic recovery of the ASEAN countries. Finally, ASEAN does not want the region to become the next battleground between the great powers. "ASEAN has a clear understanding that it can develop relations with the United States to a limited extent, but it will not target China. The influence of the United States is limited."

*This article is translated from the Chinese edition which was first published at Hong Kong China News Agency, <http://www.hkcna.hk/docDetail.jsp?id=100209333&channel=2813>.*

## About Author



Nian Peng is the Director at Research Centre for Asian Studies(RCAS), 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.