



RCAS Commentary

Will China-ASEAN Relations Take a Turn for the Better Post-Pandemic?

Nian Peng

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

January 6, 2023

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

ZIP Code: 571100|Email: pengnian@hainnu.edu.cn|Web: 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.

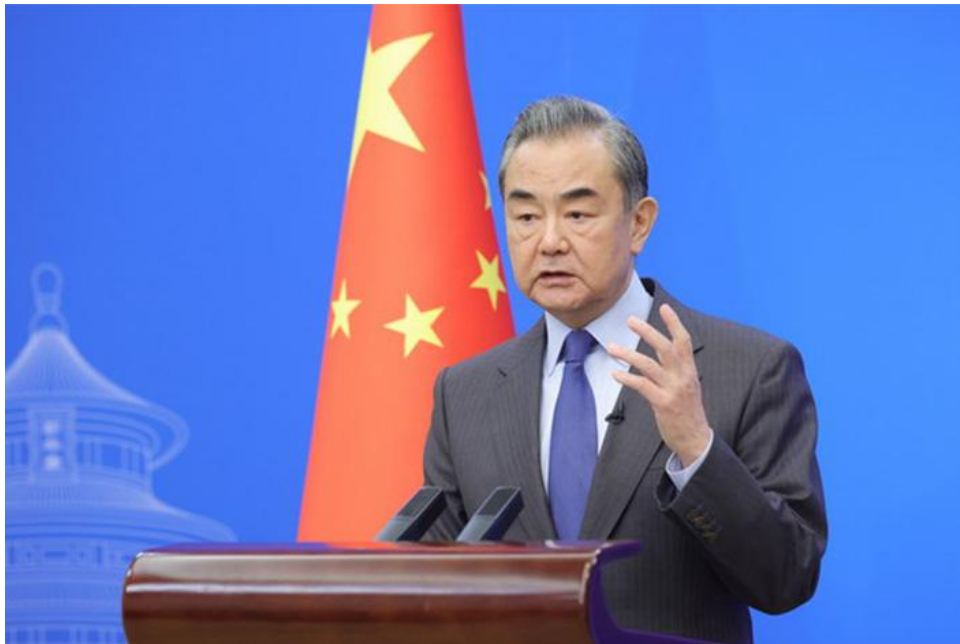
RCAS has published nearly 10 books in Chinese and English, and more than 20 papers on SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-power Rivalry*(Springer Nature, forthcoming); *Populism, Nationalism 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>.

Will China-ASEAN Relations Take a Turn for the Better Post-Pandemic?

Nian Peng

Recently, at the 2022 Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi outlined six diplomatic tasks for his country in 2023. Among them, he emphasized that China “will stay committed to the principle of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness and the policy of forging friendship and partnership in our neighborhood, and deepen friendship, mutual trust and convergence of interests with our neighbors.”



▲ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi delivers a speech via video link to a foreign relations symposium on Dec.24, 2022(source: fmprc.gov.cn)

In terms of geographical proximity and economic interdependence, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the top priority in China's neighborhood diplomacy. During the pandemic, ASEAN become China's largest trading partner, replacing the United States and the

European Union. At the same time, ASEAN worked together with China to fight COVID-19. Following China's announcement that it would lift the quarantine policy for international arrivals on January 8, 2023, China-ASEAN relations will also take a turn for the better.

In my recently published book *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), I pinpointed the dual influence of the pandemic on China-ASEAN relations. During the initial stage of the pandemic, both economic links between China and ASEAN and the Chinese image in Southeast Asia was undermined. But in the long term, trade and investment cooperation among China and ASEAN states will return to normal and actually become closer. What's more, both sides have developed deeper mutual political trust after working together to fight the pandemic, which is beneficial to closer China-ASEAN relations.

Other scholars have pointed out that the pandemic caused anti-Chinese sentiment to rise, but it remains at controllable levels. In other negative impacts, border trade was blocked, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects were postponed and Chinese tourist flows were cut off by COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Now, China is opening its borders. The hope is that China can resume pre-pandemic (or greater) levels of cooperation with ASEAN on BRI infrastructure projects, border trade, the digital economy, and in other areas.

Nevertheless, the problems accumulated during the pandemic may not be so easily solved. After nearly three years of pandemic hassles, China and ASEAN both need to adjust their policies and accommodate a new normal characterized by a more intense geopolitical and geoeconomic competition between China and the United States.

As mentioned above, at the beginning of the outbreak, almost all the ASEAN countries took measures to restrict arrivals of Chinese tourists. Now that China has reopened its borders, will ASEAN countries immediately welcome them back?

After all, Japan and India immediately issued entry quarantine restrictions for Chinese tourists, and the United States, European Union, and United Kingdom are considering taking similar measures. In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said that "COVID

response measures need to be science-based and proportionate without affecting normal travel and people-to-people exchange and cooperation.”

It is evident that the politicization of the pandemic still lingers, although the epidemic is coming to an end. Given the growing China-U.S. rivalry in Southeast Asia, the entry management measures the ASEAN countries will introduce for Chinese tourists are of particular interest. So far, only Thailand and Cambodia have overtly affirmed that they would welcome Chinese tourists without any restrictions related to COVID-19.

To ensure the continuing implementation of BRI projects that were delayed at the beginning of the pandemic, China opened a “fast lane” for personnel exchanges and a “green channel” for equipment transportation with the participating states. As a result, few BRI projects were affected severely by COVID-19.

As Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said on December 26, “This year has seen steady progress and fruitful outcomes of Belt and Road cooperation.” Not only did five new states signed cooperation documents with China to jointly build the BRI, but a large number of landmark infrastructure projects have also been completed. This includes the test operation of Jakarta-Bandung, the first high-speed railway in ASEAN, and the formal opening of the first expressway in Cambodia.

However, the recent derailment on the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, which resulted in two deaths, is a reminder for China, that the importance of safety management in construction should not be underestimated. After all, the railway is a flagship project of the BRI in Southeast Asia, and carelessness will have a negative impact on the project.

It is high expected that the BRI will swell in the post-pandemic period, as the economic recovery of ASEAN countries creates strong domestic demand for infrastructure construction. Yet, China will face a series of challenges in expanding the BRI in Southeast Asia, including hiring local labor and meeting environmental standards, as well as facing the United States’ criticism and competition.

To prevent and control the cross-border spread of COVID-19, China temporarily suspended its border trade with the neighboring countries during the pandemic. It even built an electronic

separation wall on the China-Myanmar border. This has led to a “cliff-like” decline in border trade and serious non-traditional security issues along the border.

After reopening the borders, border trade will tremendously increase in the short term. But case surges caused by imported infections and a sharp increase in border inspection pressures are also predictable challenges for both China and its ASEAN neighbors. After years of small numbers, are border authorities ready to cope with the tremendous growth of trade in a short time?

Finally, China and ASEAN nations will recover normal personnel exchanges, and the consultation on the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea can be promoted through personal contacts. However, the external environment of the COC consultation remains troubled, as there is still some turbulence both from internal and external actors.

For instance, the United States recently publicized that China was undertaking land reclamation activities on uninhabited islands and reefs in the *Nansha Qundao* (Spratly Islands). In addition, in the new context of closer cooperation between the Philippines and the United States, the Marcos administration took a much more muscular posture towards the South China Sea dispute by saying it would never yield an inch of territory and threatening to conduct unilateral oil and gas exploitation in disputed waters.

More recently, Vietnam and Indonesia reached an agreement on the demarcation of their exclusive economic zones around the Natuna Islands. This may promote some ASEAN claimant countries to build alliances on the South China Sea disputes to resist China.

In conclusion, there will be opportunities for closer China-ASEAN relations now that China reopened its borders. In order to achieve that goal, all parties should prepare to accurately respond to various needs in the post-pandemic era, ensure the smooth implementation of the mega-projects within the BRI, and properly manage differences and disputes in the South China Sea.

The article was first published at The Diplomat, January 6, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/will-china-asean-relations-take-a-turn-for-the-better-post-pandemic/>.

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.