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Nian Peng, Yuanyuan Jia: Is Vietnam teaming up with the US against China?

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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 *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>.

Content

About RCAS.....	1
RCAS Commentary.....	3

RCAS Commentary

Is Vietnam teaming up with the US against China?

Nian Peng, Yuanyuan Jia

On 25 June, the USS Ronald Reagan began a six-day port call in Vietnam, becoming only the third American aircraft carrier to dock in the country since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Previously, the USS Carl Vinson and USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carriers visited Vietnam in 2018 and 2020 respectively.



▲ Sailors gesture on the USS Robert Smalls guided missile cruiser, which is part of the carrier group accompanying the US Navy's USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier, at Tien Sa Port in Danang, Vietnam, on 25 June 2023. (Nhac Nguyen/AFP)

Prior to the visit, Vietnam and China had their latest marine confrontation near the Vanguard Bank of the South China Sea, so some Chinese media outlets have labelled the port call as an attempt by Vietnam to use the US as leverage against China.

However, at the same time, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh went to China on an official visit. During his time there, both countries agreed to manage their differences over their South China Sea dispute. Thus, it is not entirely accurate to say that Vietnam is joining hands with the US against China.

Vietnam's balancing act

In 2014, the US lifted its arms embargo against Vietnam. Since then, it has been actively seeking military cooperation with Vietnam and port calls by its aircraft carriers is an important part of this. To the US, the ideal scenario would be for its aircraft carriers to visit Vietnam annually as testament of its military cooperation with Vietnam. But, this proposal from the US put Vietnam in a difficult spot.

On the one hand, Vietnam is wary of cooperating with the US for fear of giving it an opportunity to interfere in Vietnam's domestic affairs. On the other hand, it also has to consider China's reaction. In the current climate of a growing strategic rivalry between the US and China, Vietnam should avoid being caught in the middle.

This explains the lukewarm response and subsequent refusal by Vietnam to the US's suggestion of a port call by the USS Ronald Reagan in 2022. Of course, the most important reason for its refusal then was China publicly accusing the US of disrupting the peace in the South China Sea, so Vietnam did not want any misunderstandings from China, which could further heighten tensions in the region, by hosting an American aircraft carrier then.

However, the entry of Chinese research and coastguard vessels into Vanguard Bank and its neighbouring waters this May ignited the latest maritime flare-up between Vietnam and China, increasing tension in their bilateral ties. This presented an important opportunity for the US to make its presence felt. By sending an aircraft carrier on a port call to Vietnam as a show of support, the US hopes to reboot its stagnant military ties with the country.

From Vietnam's point of view, acceding to the US's request for a port call now and using this to show China that it is rebooting its military cooperation with the US can help it to relieve both internal and external pressures without amounting to it standing up to China.

Furthermore, prior to the visit by the American aircraft carrier, China's Qi Jiguang training ship did a port call on Vietnam and tensions between the two countries have gradually settled. As such, the port call by the USS Ronald Reagan is unlikely to cause a misunderstanding with China. To avert this, a spokesperson from Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasised that the visit is a routine friendly exchange that is beneficial for regional and even international peace, stability, cooperation, and development.

Stumbling blocks for greater US-Vietnam military cooperation

While the visit by the USS Ronald Reagan marks the formal restart of military cooperation between the US and Vietnam following the Covid-19 pandemic, the future of this bilateral arrangement will not be smooth sailing.

When the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Vietnam in April this year, he officiated the groundbreaking ceremony for a new embassy which cost US\$1.2 billion with much fanfare. This was an attempt by the US to show its commitment to further bilateral ties and persuade Vietnam into upgrading bilateral relations to that of a "strategic partnership" at the tenth anniversary of their comprehensive partnership.

However, Vietnam is concerned that doing so will open the door for the US to intervene in its domestic affairs, fuelling political instability in the country. The unrest in its Dak Lak province in recent weeks has compounded Vietnamese fears. In fact, its Ministry of Public Security has openly accused the US of inciting the unrest. Undoubtedly, this incident is a major setback to American efforts to upgrade its bilateral relationship with Vietnam and the fallout is expected to persist for a lengthy period.

Additionally, Vietnam also has to consider the impact of its relationship with the US on its ties with China. Simply put, the pace and level at which its relationship with the US develops is closely related to its bilateral ties with China. As pointed out by many political analysts, Vietnam needs to maintain a careful balance between China and the US. This equilibrium hinges on the competition and collaboration between the two titans and the state of Vietnam's internal affairs.

A delicate balance

At the minimum, so long as the strategic rivalry between China and the US has not eased off, Vietnam will continue to walk its tightrope of balancing them both. This explains the official visit by its prime minister to China during the period that the USS Ronald Reagan was docked in Vietnam. Vietnam hopes that developing its ties with the US will not sour its relationship with China, much less lead to any misunderstanding or miscalculation by its northern neighbour.

Amid the continued gloom in the global economy, the prospects for Vietnam's economy are also not encouraging, so the country needs to focus on its domestic issues so as to maintain social stability. Vibrant trade and stable ties with China will help in this. Of course, Vietnam will also gladly utilise American economic resources to develop its economy, which is why it is a part of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework helmed by the US, so long as doing so does not undermine its political and social stability.

To summarise, while the port call by the USS Ronald Reagan signals a reboot in military cooperation between the US and Vietnam, it does not amount to Vietnam joining hands with the US against China and is unlikely to impact bilateral relations between Vietnam and China. For Vietnam, the key to its dream of becoming a strong nation lies in having stable ties and close economic cooperation with the major powers. Teaming up with the US to counter China will put it in the dangerous situation of taking sides in the rivalry between the two and ultimately shatter its dream.

The article was first published at Think China, Singapore, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/vietnam-teaming-us-against-china>.

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.



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