

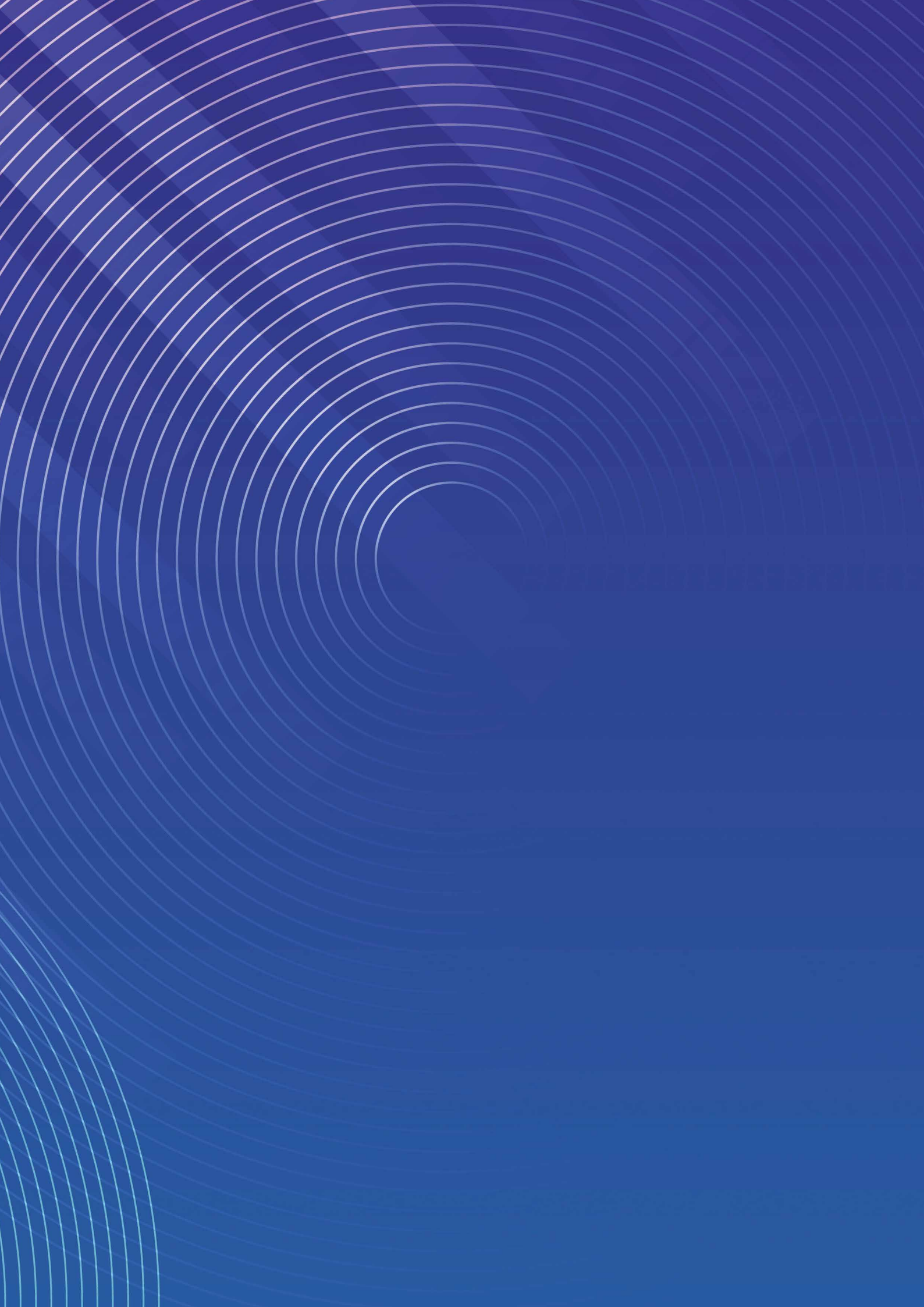
CHINA-ASEAN ENGAGEMENT

IMPLICATIONS FOR EU'S RELATIONS
WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

Prof. Dr. Mingjiang Li



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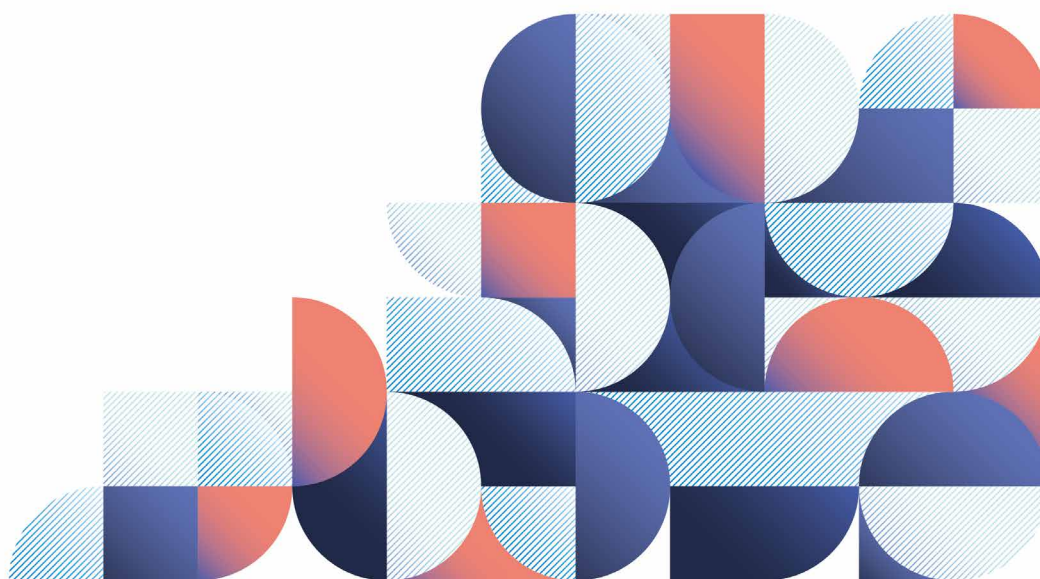




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CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	4
LIST OF TABLES	5
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6
INTRODUCTION	7
CHINA-ASEAN ECONOMIC TIES: GROWTH AND CHALLENGES	9
<i>Evolution of China-ASEAN trade in goods</i>	10
<i>Trade in services</i>	22
<i>Evolution of China-ASEAN foreign direct investments flow</i>	25
<i>Major policy initiatives</i>	27
<i>Local government's contribution to China-ASEAN economic ties</i>	29
<i>Beijing's narrative on economic ties</i>	31
SOCIO-CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND ASEAN	33
<i>Trend of growing cooperation</i>	34
<i>Cultural exchanges</i>	37
<i>Cooperation in education</i>	39
<i>Confucius institutes</i>	41
<i>Human resources training</i>	43
<i>Media and public diplomacy</i>	45
<i>Emerging conduit-social media</i>	49
<i>Local governments with socio-cultural ties</i>	50
<i>ASEAN's views of socio-cultural exchanges with China</i>	54

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN CHINA–ASEAN RELATIONS	56
<i>The South China Sea issue in China–ASEAN relations</i>	57
<i>Bilateral security ties</i>	60
<i>Vietnam and Philippines in China–ASEAN security relations</i>	63
<i>China promotes its security narratives in the region</i>	65
BRINGING IN THE EU FOR DISCUSSION	67
<i>Trajectory of EU–ASEAN relations</i>	68
<i>Opportunities and challenges in bilateral relations</i>	71
<i>Opportunities and challenges in security ties</i>	72
POTENTIAL COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND EUROPE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA	75
<i>China–Europe Cooperation in Southeast Asia</i>	76
<i>Prospects of China–Europe Collaboration in Southeast Asia</i>	78
<i>Challenges</i>	79
CONCLUSIONS	80
BIBLIOGRAPHY	82

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Trend of ASEAN-China trade, 1993-2021	10
2. Trend of China's Trade with ASEAN as a percentage of its total trade	12
3. Trend of ASEAN's trade with China as a percentage of its total trade	12
4. Trend in ASEAN trade balance with China	13
5. ASEAN import/export of services, 2012-2021 (in US\$ billion)	22
6. Intra-ASEAN import/export of services, 2012-2021 (in US\$ billion)	23
7. China import/export of services, 2012-2022 (in US\$ billion)	23
8. Visitor arrival to ASEAN by country of origin, 2012-2021 (in thousands)	24
9. China FDI as a percentage of total ASEAN FDI inflow	25
10. Inflow of FDI to ASEAN from China versus USA, 2005-2021 (in US\$ billion)	26
11. Numbers of ASEAN students in China	39
12. Numbers of CIs in ASEAN	42



LIST OF TABLES

1. China's trade with AMS and percentage of total trade in 2022	11
2. AMS trade balance with China in 2022	14
3. Structure of ASEAN exports to China, 1993 & 1999	14
4. Structure of ASEAN exports to China, 2004 & 2008	15
5. Structure of ASEAN exports to China, 2011 & 2015	16
6. Structure of ASEAN exports to China, 2018 & 2021	17
7. Structure of ASEAN imports from China, 1993 & 1999	18
8. Structure of ASEAN imports from China, 2004 & 2008	19
9. Structure of ASEAN imports from China, 2011 & 2015	20
10. Structure of ASEAN imports from China, 2018 & 2021	21
11. China-ASEAN Action Plans for implementing strategic partnership	35
12. Themes of the China-ASEAN Cultural Forum, 2014-2022	38
13. Scholarship for ASEAN students from the Chinese government	40
14. Activities under China-ASEAN Education Cooperation Week	41
15. List of major media collaborations between China and ASEAN	47
16. TikTok users in 7 ASEAN countries (million people)	50
17. China-ASEAN Education Cooperation Week milestones	53
18. Key developments in EU-ASEAN relations since 1990s	70



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

• It is crucially important to focus on the economic relations between China and ASEAN to understand the evolving strategic dynamics in the region. For more than two decades, China's comprehensive and deep economic engagements with Southeast Asia have contributed to its strong relations with the region. China has remained as ASEAN's largest trading partner for the 13th consecutive year since 2009. In the past decade, ASEAN-China trade in goods more than doubled. ASEAN, as a regional bloc, became China's largest trading partner since overtaking the European Union (EU) in 2020.

• China's influence in Southeast Asia has increased to the extent that Beijing now has more economic and political clout in the region than many other major powers. At the same time, regional countries continue to harbor strategic distrust towards China, and they are not prepared to accept China's dominance in the region. Regional states which are concerned about their economic dependence on China have made efforts to diversify their economic ties with other major partners.

• China has made some progress in developing closer security ties with ASEAN countries as well, but major constraints continue to exist in bilateral security relations. The South China Sea disputes, in particular Beijing's assertiveness in handling the disputes, remain the biggest challenge to China-Southeast Asian relations. For this reason, some ASEAN countries which distrust China are supportive of a strong US security presence in the region.

• China's engagement with ASEAN reflects Beijing's whole-of-state approach. In addition

to national political leaders and central government agencies, various actors within China, including the local governments, research institutions, and media organizations, have also played an active and effective role in China-ASEAN relations.

• Beijing has made great efforts to promote its narratives, such as good-neighborliness, win-win cooperation, and a regional community, in its interactions with ASEAN. These narratives have at least partially helped build closer ties between China and ASEAN states and shape ASEAN policy elites' views on regional geopolitical landscape.

• China-US strategic rivalry in Southeast Asia appears to be unabated. Other major players such as Japan, Australia, and the EU are also important forces shaping the regional strategic dynamics. While most ASEAN countries support stronger involvement of other major players in the region, some of them are also concerned that the geostrategic rivalry may eventually get out of control. ASEAN is particularly worried about the negative impacts on its centrality in regional multilateralism.

• The EU should take full advantage of its strengths to engage with ASEAN countries. Priorities can be given to digital economy, innovation, human resources, capacity building, public health, and security multilateralism.

• China-Europe cooperation in Southeast Asia has been quite limited. Despite differences in geopolitical goals and business practices, China and Europe may consider upgrading their collaboration in Southeast Asia to a slightly higher level.

INTRODUCTION

Among policy practitioners and research analysts who are interested in geopolitics in the Asia/Indo-Pacific region, there is a prevalent view that China has been significantly expanding its influence at the expense of the United States and its allies. Many observers note that the growth of Beijing's geopolitical clout has been particularly salient in Southeast Asia. The region now has become a major target for major-power rivalry, involving China, the U.S., Japan, Australia, India, and European countries. This paper attempts to address a major question: how did China engage with ASEAN countries in the past few decades? On top of this central question, we will also explore the implications of China-ASEAN engagement for the relations between European countries and Southeast Asia.

These issues are important for a number of considerations. First, Asian regional affairs analysts predominantly agree that China's influence has increased significantly in Southeast Asia over the past 20 years. The State of Southeast Asia surveys, conducted annually since 2019 by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore in recent years, suggest that China emerged as the most influential power in the strategic, political, and economic arenas in the region.¹ The Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2023 also shows that China's influence in Southeast Asia has surpassed that of the U.S. in terms of economic cooperation, defense networks, diplomatic ties, and cultural influence.² These observations highlight a natural puzzle: How did China establish such a high level of strategic clout in the region? What strategic, tactical, and policy approaches did China adopt? What are the different regional states' responses to the Chinese initiatives? How do the domestic socio-political and economic contexts of these countries shape the regional states' responses?

Second, it is also known that many regional countries harbor strategic mistrust toward China, primarily (though not exclusively) due to the South China Sea disputes and Beijing's assertive actions in handling the disputes. This negative sentiment is well documented in the above-mentioned ISEAS surveys, suggesting that a significant segment of elites in regional countries are concerned about China's power and influence. The question is, why do some Southeast Asian countries' continue to distrust China. Another question is, what are the challenges and limitations of China's engagement with ASEAN countries?

Third, with the intensification of U.S.–China rivalry, Southeast Asia has become a key region for major power strategic competition. Regional countries have felt the pressure from both

1 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). (2023). *State of Southeast Asia Survey*. Retrieved from <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>.

2 Patton, S., & Sato, J. (2023, April 20). *Asia Power Snapshot: China and the United States in Southeast Asia*. Lowy Institute Asia. Retrieved from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/asia-power-snapshot-china-united-states-southeast-asia>.

powers to take sides. So far, most countries and ASEAN as a collective institution have been keen to maintain a strategically neutral position. Strategic hedging continues to be favored by most regional states. Japan, India, Australia, the EU, and other major players have also adopted a geopolitical perspective of Southeast Asia as part of their respective Indo-Pacific strategy. In this context, it would be interesting to examine (a) the ASEAN countries' domestic socio-political responses to the growing strategic rivalry, and (b) regional countries' perceptions of the EU's role in regional social, economic and security affairs (an area that has been under-researched).

This paper attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of China-ASEAN engagement across various sectors, including politics, diplomacy, economics, society, education, and security. We seek to build on the research done on China's economic statecraft and security challenges in the region by focusing on some of the under-studied areas. Examples include China's socio-educational engagement with ASEAN countries, the impacts of Beijing's narrative power, Chinese subnational governments' role in engaging with regional countries, and Beijing's policy adaptations for different countries.

Equally important, we will attempt to analyze how regional states and their domestic forces respond to these Chinese initiatives and how these interactions eventually help shape the dynamics in the relations between ASEAN countries and China. Building on the individual countries' policy responses, we will examine the ASEAN's institutional behavior toward China as well. To understand the European countries' involvement in Southeast Asia, we include the EU factor, which will enable us to compare the EU's engagement with ASEAN with that of China. Certainly, our final aim is to identify the actions that the EU could take to improve its engagement with ASEAN and its member states and explore the possibility of Europe-China collaboration in Southeast Asia.

The background is a solid blue color with a subtle, abstract pattern of concentric circles and a grid of lines, creating a sense of depth and movement.

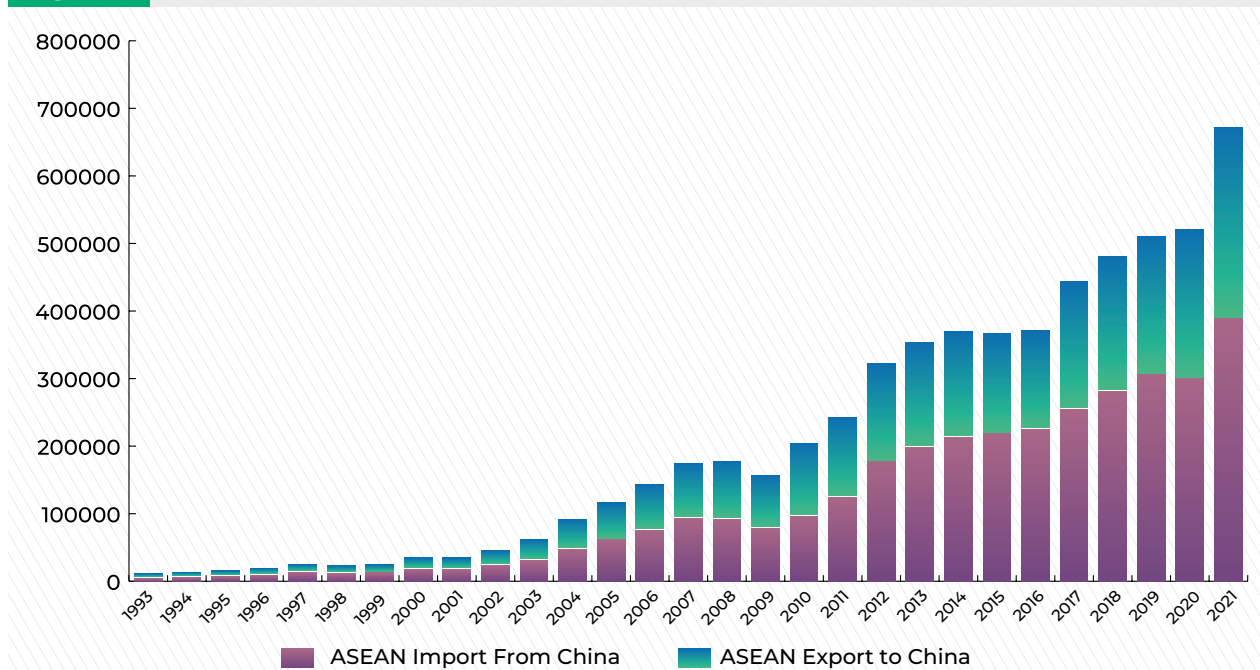
CHINA-ASEAN ECONOMIC TIES: GROWTH AND CHALLENGES

Chinese foreign relations scholars generally agree that China has successfully used its economic statecraft to achieve various geopolitical objectives. This is particularly the case in China's relations with Southeast Asia. Many analysts agree that strong economic cooperation between China and regional countries greatly boosted China's influence in the region. This section shows the development of economic ties between ASEAN countries and China since the 1990s in three areas: (a) trade in goods, (b) trade in services, and (c) foreign direct investments. Moving beyond a national-level perspective, we illustrate how substantive economic engagements were achieved by China's local governments.

Evolution of ASEAN–China trade in goods

ASEAN–China trade has been on a rising trend since the 1990s (see Figure 1³). In 1993, this figure was only US\$8.87 billion. In 2013, this figure stood at more than US\$351 billion and by 2021, this figure reached a new peak at US\$669.2 billion.

Figure 1 Trend of ASEAN–China trade, 1993-2021



Source: various years of the ASEAN Statistical Yearbooks, cf. footnote 3.

³ ASEAN Statistical Yearbooks from 2005, 2008, 2012 and 2022.

In terms of trade reliance, China has remained as ASEAN's largest trading partner for the 13th consecutive year since 2009. ASEAN, as a regional bloc, became China's largest trading partner since overtaking the European Union (EU) in 2020. In 2022, trade with all ASEAN Member States (AMS) accounted for 15.5 percent of China's total trade (see Table 1). In 1999 and 2014, this figure was 7.3 percent and 11.1 percent respectively. In 2022, trade with China accounted for 21.4 percent of ASEAN's total trade.⁴ This figure was 3.9 percent in 2000 and 14.5 percent in 2014. Overall, both sides became more dependent on each other for trade; however, ASEAN became substantially more reliant on China's trade than vice versa. For the overall trend of trade reliance, see Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Table 1 China's trade with AMS and percentage of total trade in 2022

ASEAN Member States	Total Trade with China (in US\$ billion)	As a Percentage of China's Total Trade Volume (Column 3)	As a Percentage of the AMS' respective total trade volume (Column 4)
Vietnam	234.9	3.72%	24.1%
Malaysia	203.6	3.23%	17.1%
Indonesia	149.1	2.36%	28.1% ⁵
Thailand	135.0	2.14%	17.9%
Singapore	115.1	1.82%	12.8%
The Philippines	87.7	1.39%	18.1%
Myanmar	25.1	0.40%	27.0%
Cambodia	16.0	0.25%	25.7%
Laos	5.7	0.09%	26.2% (2021)
Brunei	3.1	0.05%	14.9% (2020)
Total ASEAN-China Trade	975.2	15.5%	-

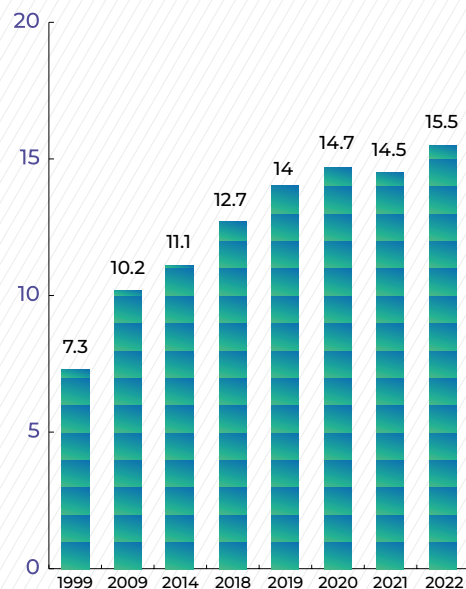
Data compiled by the author.

Source: GACC (except for Column 4: derived from the respective AMS official data)

⁴ Derived by the average of Column 4 for the top 8 ASEAN states (i.e., excluding Laos and Brunei).

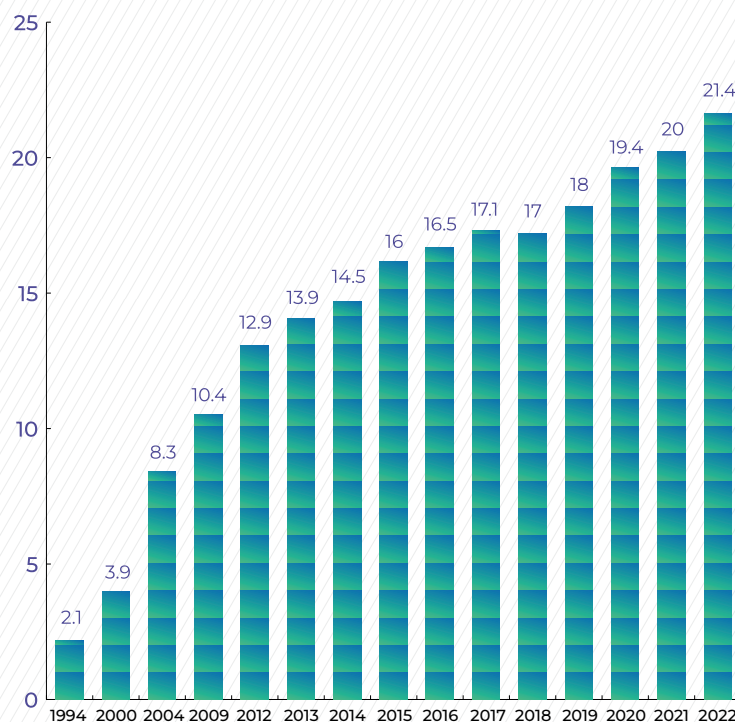
⁵ Data derived from official estimation reported by the Indonesian Ambassador to Beijing.

Figure 2 Trend of China's trade with ASEAN as a percentage of its total trade



Data compiled by the author
Source: GACC from 2014 onwards (1999 & 2009 data from ADB (2019))

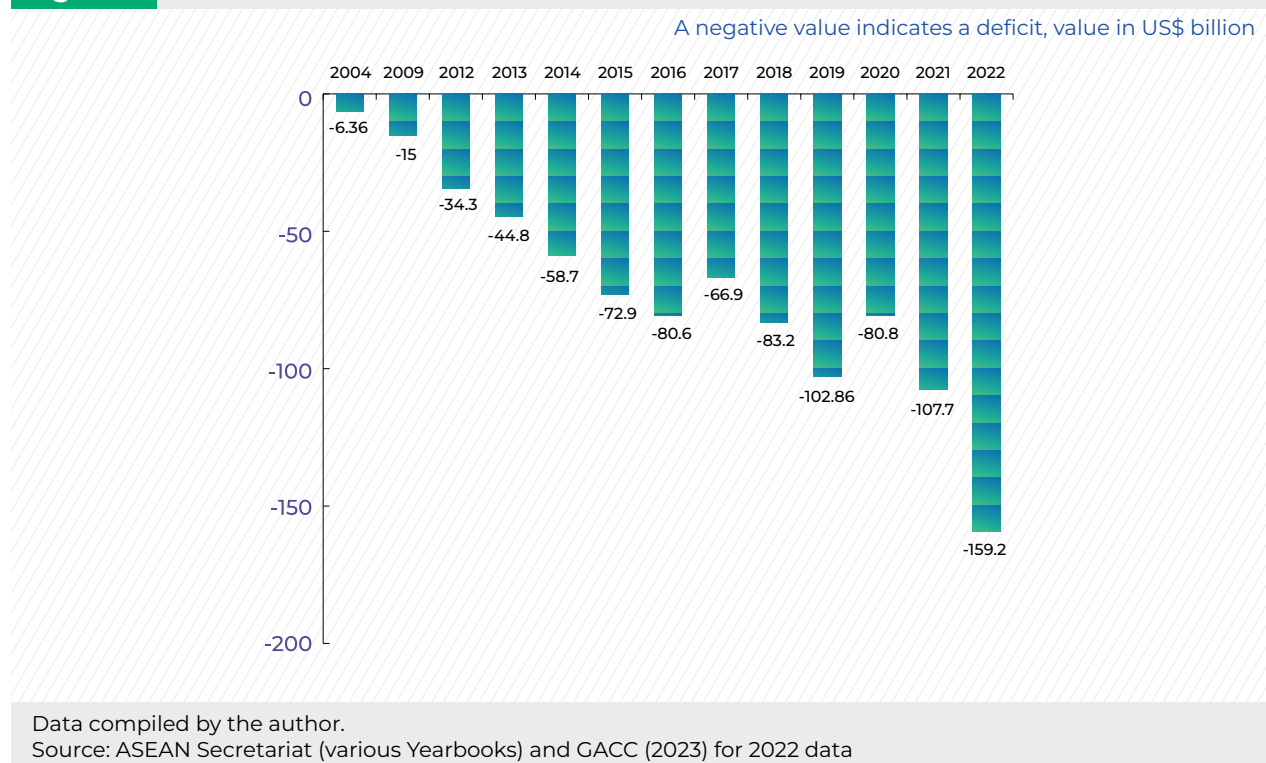
Figure 3 Trend of ASEAN's trade with China as a percentage of its total trade



Data compiled by the author
Source: ASEAN Secretariat 2001 & various Yearbooks

In terms of trade balance, ASEAN's trade deficit with China has grown quite significantly over the years. This figure increased significantly from a deficit of US\$6.36 billion in 2004 to US\$44.8 billion in 2013, and then to US\$159.2 billion in 2022 (see Figure 4). By 2022, variations in trade asymmetry became significant among individual AMS with China; therefore, this figure is further disaggregated into individual AMS (see Table 2). Of note, Vietnam's trade deficit with China in 2022 topped at US\$59.0 billion and increased rapidly over the last two decades. According to WITS data, Vietnam was running a trade surplus of US\$135.2 million in 2000. By 2009, Vietnam's trade deficit with China was US\$11.27 billion. To reduce its reliance on Chinese imports, Vietnam has signed as many as 15 bilateral and regional FTAs since 2014.⁶ Some notable examples are the European Union-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement and the UK-Vietnam FTA. However, it remains a challenge for Vietnam to wean off its reliance on Chinese imports, as seen by the current deficit and its increasing trend.

Figure 4 Trend in ASEAN trade balance with China



6 Tran, Bich T. (2021, August 27). *Vietnam Continues Efforts to Reduce Trade Dependence on China*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Perspective. Retrieved from <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-114-vietnam-continues-efforts-to-reduce-trade-dependence-on-china-by-bich-t-tran/>.

Table 2 AMS trade balance with China in 2022

A negative value indicates a deficit

ASEAN Member States	Amount in US\$ billion
Vietnam	-59.0
Singapore	-47.2
The Philippines	-41.6
Thailand	-22.0
Laos	-10.8
Myanmar	-2.1
Cambodia	-0.5
Brunei	1.4
Indonesia	6.45
Malaysia	16.2
ASEAN-China Net Balance	-159.2

Data compiled by the author. Source: GACC 2023

In terms of trade structure, China-ASEAN trade evolved quite considerably from 1993 to 1999. According to data compiled by the ASEAN-China Expert Group on Economic Cooperation, the focus of ASEAN's exports to China shifted from commodities toward manufactured products from 1993 to 1999 (see Table 3). Computers/machinery and electrical equipment grew from 12.4 percent to 38.2 percent of ASEAN's exports to China. Over the years, "electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof" remained as the largest share of ASEAN's exports to China. From 2004 to 2021, the top three export categories remained the same without a clear change to the structure of ASEAN's export to China (Table 4, Table 5, and Table 6).

Table 3 Structure of ASEAN exports to China, 1993 & 1999

1993			1999		
Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share	Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share
Lubricants/Fuels/Oil	1.46	32.3%	Computer/Machinery	1.94	20.3%
Wood	1.03	22.6%	Electrical Equipment	1.71	17.9%
Fats and Oils	0.38	8.4%	Lubricants/Fuels/Oil	1.09	11.4%
Computer/Machinery	0.29	6.4%	Fats and Oils	0.52	5.4%
Electrical Equipment	0.29	6.0%	Wood	0.51	5.1%
Total	3.43	75.7%	Total	5.77	60.3%

Table from: ASEAN-China Expert Group on Economic Cooperation (2001), 9.
Source: ASEAN Secretariat

Table 4 Structure of ASEAN exports to China, 2004 & 2008

2004			2008		
Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share	Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share
Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof ⁷	10.89	28.3%	Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof	23.1	26.4%
Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	7.24	18.8%	Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	14.3	16.3%
Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	4.50	11.7%	Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	12.6	14.4%
Organic Chemicals	2.39	6.2%	Rubber and articles thereof	6.19	7.1%
Plastics and articles thereof	2.31	6.0%	Animal or vegetable fats and oils and their cleavage products; prepared edible fats; animal or vegetable waxes	5.80	6.6%
Total (Top 5 commodities)	27.33	71%	Total (Top 5 commodities)	55.25	70.8%
Total (Top 10 commodities)	33.15	86.0%	Total (Top 10 commodities)	81.59	81.8%

Compiled by the author. Source: ASEAN Secretariat (various Yearbooks)

⁷ This product category includes sound recorders and reproducers, television image and sound recorders and reproducers, as well as parts and accessories of such articles.

Table 5 Structure of ASEAN exports to China, 2011 & 2015

2011			2015		
Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share	Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share
Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof ⁸	30.59	24.0%	Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof	40.67	28.0%
Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	22.50	17.6%	Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	15.98	11.0%
Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	13.86	10.9%	Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	13.48	9.3%
Rubber and articles thereof	12.30	9.6%	Plastics and articles thereof	9.02	6.2%
l or vegetable fats and oils and their cleavage products; prepared edible fats; animal or vegetable waxes	7.89	6.2%	Rubber and articles thereof	7.06	4.9%
Total (Top 5 commodities)	87.14	68.3%	Total (Top 5 commodities)	86.21	59.4%
Total (Top 10 commodities)	106.81	83.7%	Total (Top 10 commodities)	94.91	75.7%

Compiled by the author. Source: ASEAN Secretariat (various Yearbooks)

⁸ This product category includes sound recorders and reproducers, television image and sound recorders and reproducers, as well as parts and accessories of such articles.

Table 6 Structure of ASEAN exports to China, 2018 & 2021

2018			2021		
Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share	Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share
Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof	54.04	27.2%	Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof	79.02	28.1%
Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	22.62	11.4%	Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	30.34	10.8%
Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	15.07	7.6%	Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	20.78	7.4%
Plastics and articles thereof	12.50	6.3%	Iron and steel	18.21	6.5%
Organic Chemicals	9.02	4.5%	Plastics and articles thereof	13.09	4.7%
Total (Top 5 commodities)	113.25	57.0%	Total (Top 5 commodities)	161.44	57.5%
Total (Top 10 commodities)	144.31	72.5%	Total (Top 10 commodities)	205.98	73.4%

Compiled by the author. Source: ASEAN Secretariat (various Yearbooks)

For ASEAN's import from China, the broad trend is similar in that the focus of ASEAN's imports from China shifted noticeably from commodities toward manufactured products from 1993 to 1999 (see Table 7). Computers/machinery and electrical equipment grew from 20.8 percent to 46.6 percent of ASEAN's imports from China. the category "Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof" remained as the largest share of ASEAN's imports from China. From 2004 to 2021, there is no clear change to the structure of ASEAN's imports from China with the top two import categories remaining the same throughout the decade (compare Table 8, Table 9, and Table 10). The top two import categories made up approximately 50 percent of ASEAN imports from China.

Table 7 Structure of ASEAN imports from China, 1993 & 1999

1993			1999		
Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share	Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share
Electrical Equipment	0.48	11.1%	Electrical Equipment	3.24	26.6%
Computer/Machinery	0.42	9.7%	Computer/Machinery	2.44	20.0%
Lubricants/Fuels/Oil	0.39	9.0%	Cereals	0.52	4.3%
Cotton	0.24	5.6%	Lubricants/Fuels/Oil	0.43	3.6%
Tobacco	0.18	4.2%	Ships/Boats	0.3	2.5%
Total	1.72	39.6%	Total	6.9	57.0%

Table from: ASEAN-China Expert Group on Economic Cooperation (2001), 10.
Source: ASEAN Secretariat

Table 8 Structure of ASEAN imports from China, 2004 & 2008

2004			2009		
Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share	Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share
Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof ⁹	14.14	33.3%	Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof	31.4	28.7%
Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	10.49	24.7%	Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	24.19	22.1%
Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	1.87	4.4%	Iron and steel	7.94	7.3%
Iron and Steel	1.79	4.2%	Articles of iron or steel	4.02	3.7%
Optical, photographic, cinematographic, measuring, checking, precision, medical or surgical instruments and apparatus; parts and accessories thereof	0.98	2.3%	Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	3.48	3.2%
Total (Top 5 commodities)	29.27	68.9%	Total (Top 5 commodities)	71.03	65.0%
Total (Top 10 commodities)	32.63	76.7%	Total (Top 10 commodities)	81.3	74.4%

Compiled by the author. Source: ASEAN Secretariat (various Yearbooks)

⁹ This product category includes sound recorders and reproducers; television image and sound recorders and reproducers, as well as parts and accessories of such articles.

Table 9 Structure of ASEAN imports from China, 2011 & 2015

2011			2015		
Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share	Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share
Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof	42.82	28.1%	Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof	63.51	29.9%
Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	33.25	21.8%	Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	37.92	17.9%
Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	6.68	4.4%	Iron and steel	13.15	6.2%
Iron and steel	6.38	4.2%	Articles of iron and steel	7.97	3.8%
Articles of iron and steel	5.00	3.3%	Plastics and articles thereof	6.68	3.1%
Total (Top 5 commodities)	94.13	61.8%	Total (Top 5 commodities)	129.23	60.9%
Total (Top 10 commodities)	109.35	71.7%	Total (Top 10 commodities)	153.28	72.2%

Compiled by the author. Source: ASEAN Secretariat (various Yearbooks)

Table 10 Structure of ASEAN Imports from China, 2018 & 2021

2018			2021		
Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share	Product Category	Exports (US\$ billion)	Share
Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof	85.52	30.0%	Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof	128.94	33.2%
Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	47.60	16.7%	Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	62.10	16.0%
Iron and steel	14.92	5.2%	Plastics and articles thereof	17.52	4.5%
Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	13.66	4.8%	Iron and steel	15.51	4.0%
Plastics and articles thereof	10.85	3.8%	Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	13.42	3.5%
Total (Top 5 commodities)	172.55	60.5%	Total (Top 5 commodities)	237.49	61.2%
Total (Top 10 commodities)	204.31	71.7%	Total (Top 10 commodities)	282.29	72.7%

Compiled by the author. Source: ASEAN Secretariat (various Yearbooks)

Looking at both exports and imports in the last decade, the strongest growth in terms of absolute number lies in the category "Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof". Items in this product category have also remained as the top exports and imports to/from China, suggesting that intra-industry trade between both sides has increased in importance. As mentioned earlier, the trade deficit that ASEAN incurred from its trade with China has increased rapidly over the last decade. Unpacking the trade structure reveals the product category ("Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof") and "Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; parts thereof"; the latter contributed the most to this burgeoning imbalance.

Trade in Services

ASEAN total import and export of services from 2012 to 2021 are shown in Figure 5. Do note that this is ASEAN's aggregate services data and not ASEAN-China services trade. Intra-ASEAN import and export of services follow similar patterns with total import and export of services (see Figure 6). Hence, reliance on service trade within ASEAN remains the same.

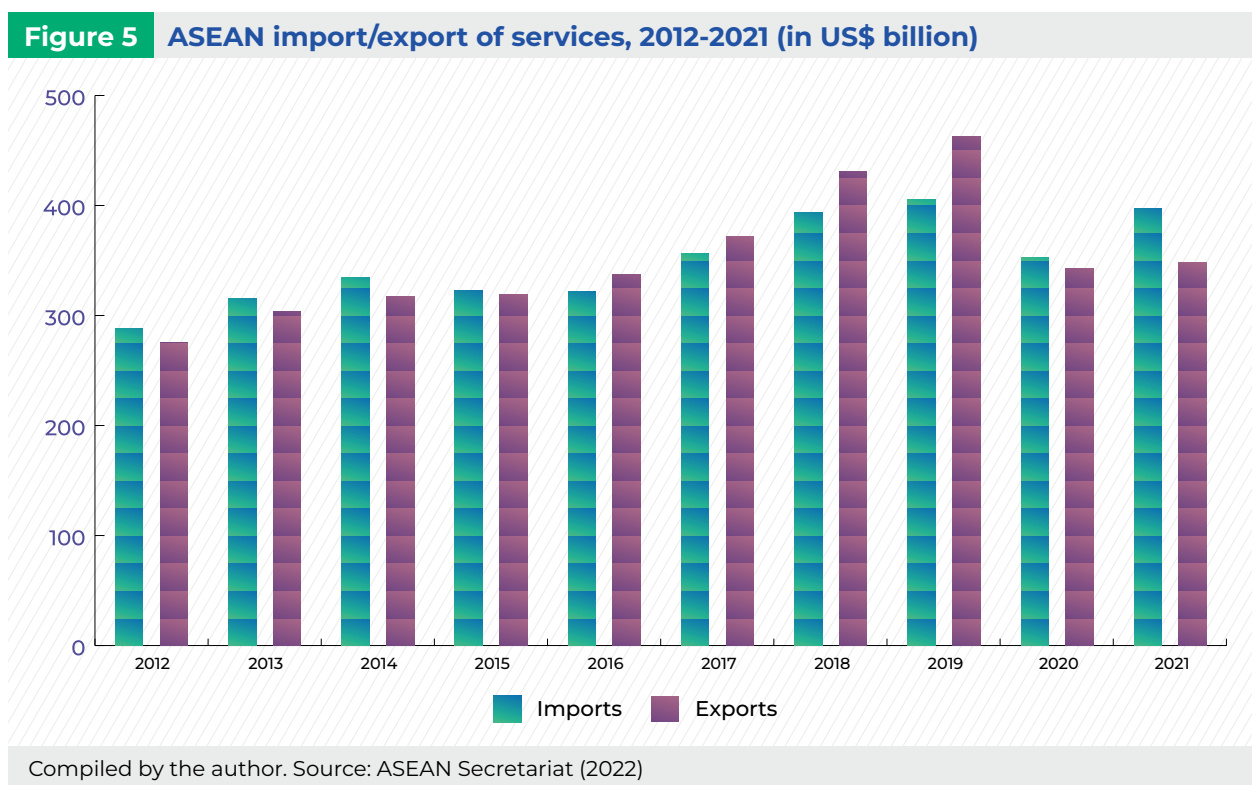
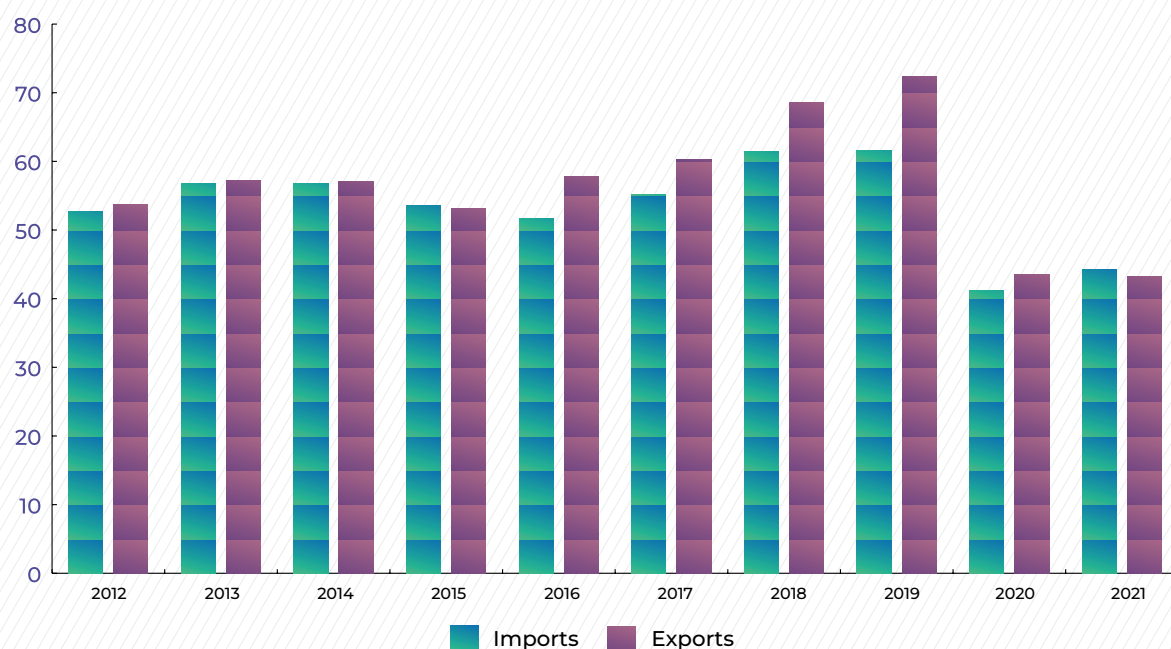
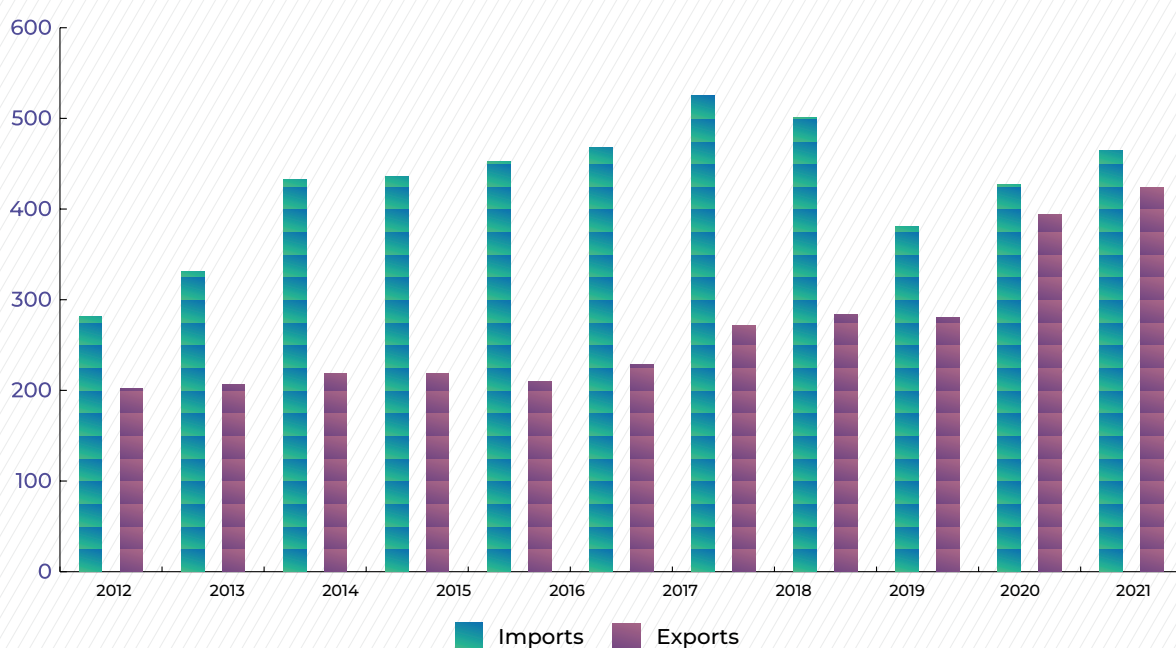


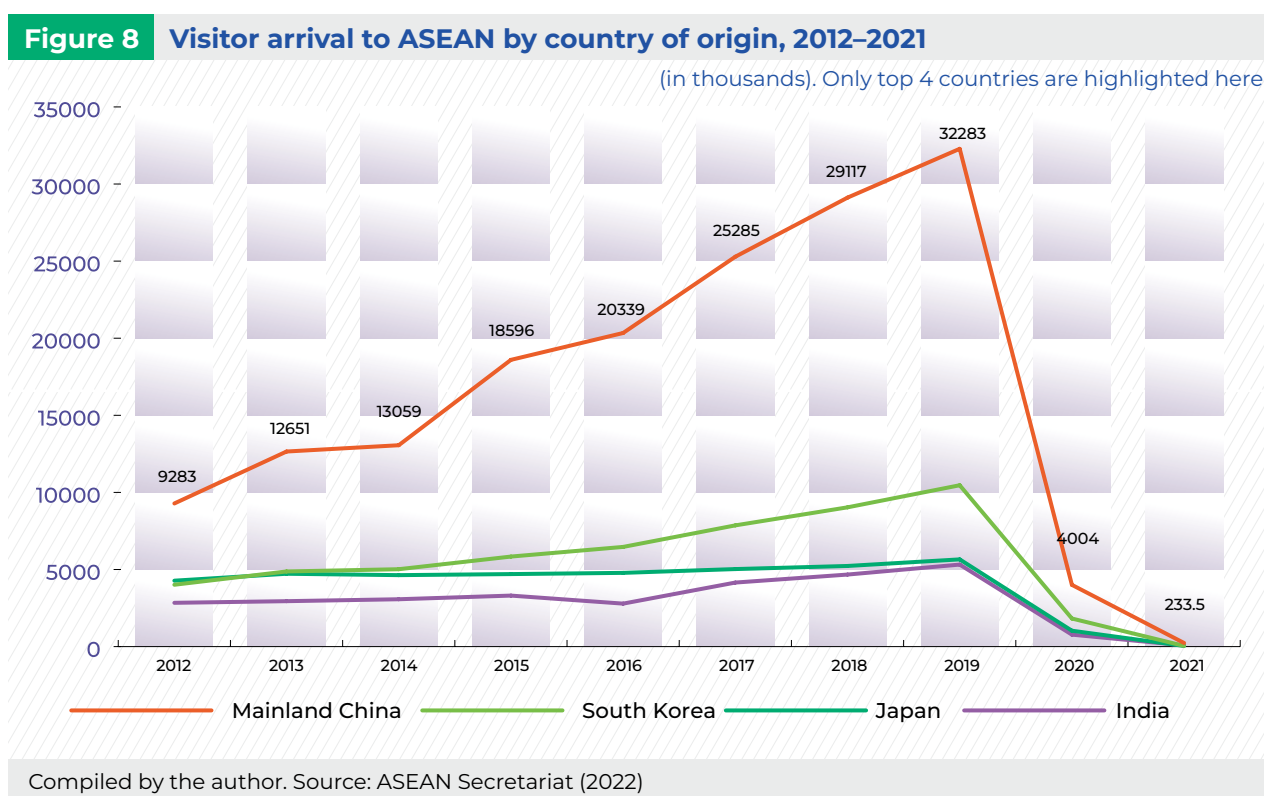
Figure 6 Intra-ASEAN import/export of services, 2012-2021 (in US\$ billion)

Compiled by the author. Source: ASEAN Secretariat (2022)

Figure 7 China import/export of services, 2012-2022 (in US\$ billion)

Compiled by the author. Source: MOFCOM (2012-2022)

China's import/export of services data show a significant trend (see Figure 7). From a services trade deficit of more than US\$210 billion from 2014 to 2019, this deficit shrank to US\$101 billion in 2020 and finally to US\$41.0 billion in 2022. Data on bilateral ASEAN-China services trade are not easily available. Mainland China has been, by far, the largest country by source of visitor arrivals for ASEAN (see Figure 8). At its peak in 2019, approximately 32.28 million Chinese visited ASEAN countries, accounting for 22.5 percent of all visitors.



It represents a major source of tourism revenue for some ASEAN countries pre-pandemic, not to mention that it is on a significant rising trend before the pandemic outbreak. Of note, in 2019, mainland China visitors accounted for 35.7 percent, 32.2 percent, and 27.6 percent of all visitors to Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand respectively.¹⁰ Traditionally, the economy of these countries also rely quite heavily on tourism. Prior to the pandemic, the contribution of international tourism to the individual country's 2019 GDP is as follows: Cambodia (19.6 percent), Vietnam (18.5 percent), and Thailand (11.5 percent). Strong tourism also attracts investments for related peripheral industries such as entertainment, hotel, and F&B businesses.

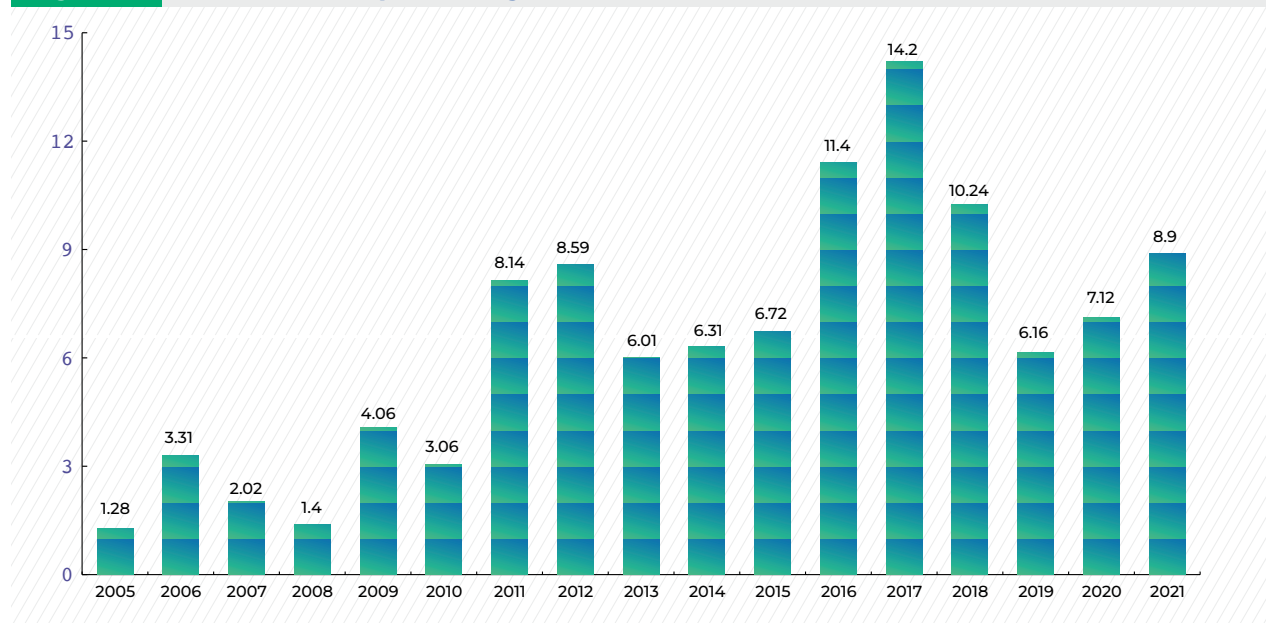
¹⁰ ASEANstats. (n.d.). *ASEAN Statistical Yearbook, 2013–2022*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <https://www.aseanstats.org/ebooks/ebook-publication-by-titles/>.

Evolution of China-ASEAN Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) Flow

China's role as an investor to ASEAN's economy has expanded significantly over the decades. In 2005, China was responsible for only 1.28 percent of ASEAN's total FDI inflow. In 2011, this number was 8.14 percent. In 2017, the FDI from China to ASEAN peaked at US\$18.05 billion, accounting for 14.2 percent of ASEAN's total FDI inflow. The latest figure stood at 8.9 percent in 2021 (see Figure 9 for trend). From 2020 to 2021, FDI from China almost doubled from US\$7.1 billion to approximately US\$13.6 billion due to growth in various sectors: manufacturing, EV-related investment, digital economy, infrastructure, and real estate.¹¹ A comprehensive breakdown of FDI inflow into ASEAN from China by industry from 2012 to 2021 is available at the ASEAN Secretariat.¹²

The U.S. has long been ASEAN's largest source of FDI (see Figure 10), with the EU and Japan following close behind. The U.S. accounted for 24.0 percent and 26.3 percent of ASEAN's total FDI inflow in 2017 and 2021 respectively.

Figure 9 China FDI as a percentage of total ASEAN FDI inflow

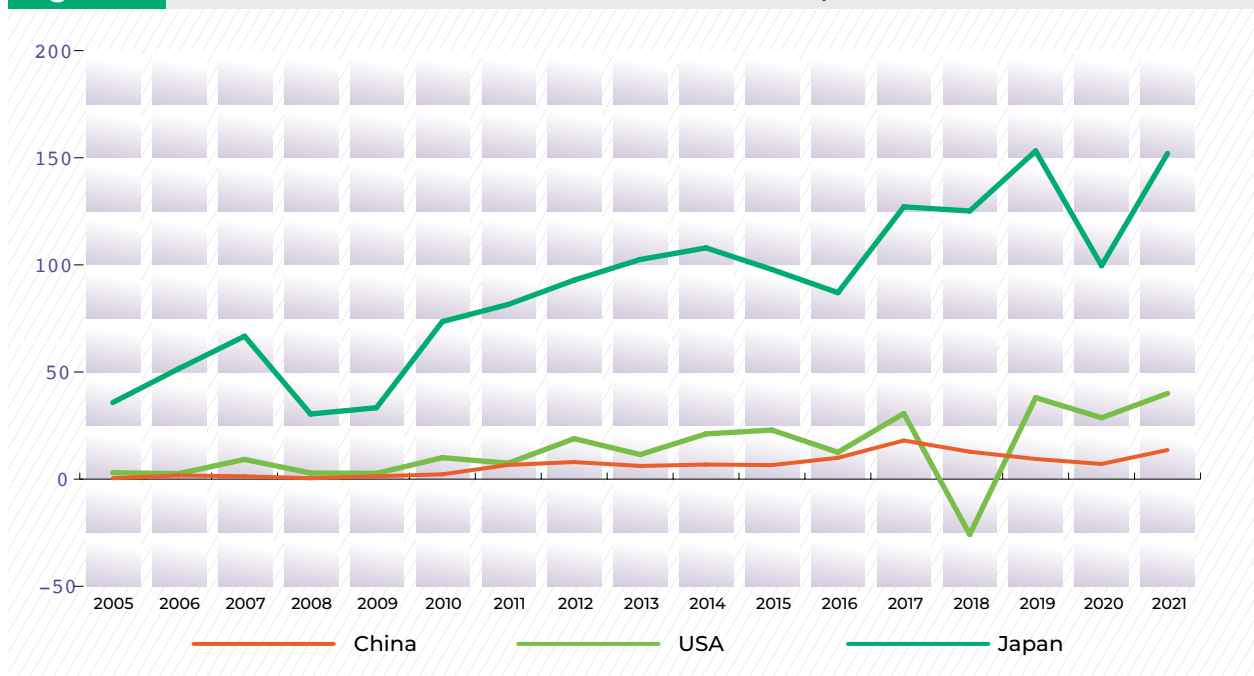


Compiled by the author.

Source: ASEAN Secretariat (various Yearbooks) and ASEAN Secretariat & UNCTAD (2022)

¹¹ ASEAN Secretariat & United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2022, October). *ASEAN Investment Report 2022*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <https://asean.org/book/asean-investment-report-2022>.

¹² ASEANstats. (n.d.). *ASEAN Statistical Yearbook*, 2013–2022. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <https://www.aseanstats.org/ebooks/ebook-publication-by-titles/>.

Figure 10 Inflow of FDI to ASEAN from China versus U.S., 2005 – 2021 (in US\$ billion).


Compiled by the author.

Source: ASEAN Secretariat (various Yearbooks) and ASEAN Secretariat & UNCTAD (2022)

ASEAN as a bloc is not China's major foreign investor. The exception is Singapore. According to MOFCOM data (2008–2019), Singapore was China's largest FDI source from 2013 to 2019. In 2019, for example, Singapore investments accounted for 5.5 percent of China's total FDI inflow.¹³ The rest of the AMS did not feature in China's top ten investors since 2008. Other than Singapore, important sources of China's FDI includes Japan, South Korea, U.S., the Netherlands, and Germany.

¹³ Santander, Trade. (2024, March 4). *China: Foreign Investments*. Retrieved from <https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/establish-overseas/china/foreign-investment>.

Major Policy Initiatives

The continued deepening of ASEAN–China economic engagement can be attributed, at least in part, to the success of ASEAN–China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA), which was upgraded over the years. In November 2002, the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation was signed to establish the ASEAN–China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA). The aim was to progressively eliminate tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers, liberalize trade in services, and enhance the flow of FDI. The following three agreements were concluded: (a) the Trade in Goods Agreement in July 2005, (b) Trade in Services Agreement in July 2007, and (c) the Agreement on Investment in August 2009.

The ACFTA came into effect on January 1, 2010. In that year, the average tariff imposed by China on ASEAN exports to China was reduced from 9.8 percent to 0.1 percent; similarly, the average tariff imposed by ASEAN-6¹⁴ on China imports were reduced from 12.8 percent to 0.6 per cent.¹⁵ The upgrading process of the ACFTA (along with the three existing agreements) started in November 2015 with the signing of the ACFTA Upgrading Protocol, which introduced improvements and amendments to the existing agreements.¹⁶

According to the ASEAN Secretariat, the ACFTA 2.0 was fully implemented in August 2019. At present, negotiation and consultation of another upgrade to the ACFTA (ACFTA 3.0) is underway. In late 2022, the ASEAN–China Centre claimed that more than 7,000 types of goods were eligible for zero tariff treatment. Beyond trade in goods, the successive iterations of ACFTA have also created a conducive environment to liberalize services trade and FDI flow between both sides. Moving along with the times, the ACFTA 3.0 can continue to deepen ASEAN–China economic engagement.

Beyond the ACFTA, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has since been ratified by all ten ASEAN Member States (AMS).¹⁷ Individual bilateral FTAs with China¹⁸ are also expected to contribute to regional economic integration. Beyond FTAs, many China–ASEAN initiatives have also broadened and strengthened economic ties. The wide myriad of initiatives and agreements/memorandums of understanding (MOUs) were signed to strengthen cooperation in areas of (1) production capacity, (2) agriculture, (3) information and communication technology, (4) modes of

14 Excluding Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV).

15 Liu, Jianren. (2012). *Early Review of ACFTA: Achievements, Problems and its Impact on Sino-ASEAN Relations*. In K. E. Flick & K. M. Kemburi (Eds.), *ASEAN–China Free Trade Area: Challenges, Opportunities and the Road Ahead* (pp. 11-16). Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2000/01/Monograph22.pdf>.

16 For detailed information of the key upgrades and amendments, refer to MTI-Singapore (Ministry of Trade and Industry - Singapore). (2016, September 26). *Guide to the Upgraded ASEAN–China Free Trade Area (ACFTA)*. Retrieved from <https://www.mti.gov.sg/Resources/feature-articles/2016/Guide-to-the-upgraded-ASEAN-China-Free-Trade-Area-ACFTA>.

17 The Philippines ratified the RCEP in February 2023. It was the last ASEAN state to do so.

18 Only Singapore and Cambodia have signed individual bilateral FTA with China.

transport, (5) smart cities collaboration, (6) tourism, (7) sanitary and phytosanitary cooperation, (8) science and technology, (9) innovation, and (10) connectivity. Cooperation in these ten areas is expected to synergize the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 with the BRI.¹⁹

Beijing announced that Southeast Asia is a priority region for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The goals of the BRI include promoting the following: (1) policy coordination, (2) facilities connectivity, (3) unimpeded trade, (4) financial integration, and (5) people-to-people exchanges. Since 2013, the BRI has deepened economic cooperation between China and Southeast Asia. In terms of FDI, the BRI had increased the flow of FDI to ASEAN by encouraging Chinese firms to undertake large-scale infrastructural projects in ASEAN countries. The average annual value of FDI flowing from mainland Chinese companies into Southeast Asian countries from 2014 to 2018 increased by 85 percent as compared to the average annual value from 2010 to 2013 (before the BRI).²⁰ The average annual value of construction projects also increased by 33 percent (comparing the same time periods). This could explain the increasing significance of China's role as an investor of ASEAN's economy, at least since the introduction of the BRI.

As many key BRI projects are large-scale public infrastructural projects with long maturation periods, Chinese economic presence in Southeast Asia is expected to continue in the long term. Some examples of such projects in the region are railways, energy-related infrastructure, and facilities, as well as ports and smart cities. New developments within the BRI (such as the Health Silk Road and the Green Silk Road) are likely to increase Chinese investments in Southeast Asia. During the pandemic, the BRI's health sector engagements increased more than twice from US\$130 million to US\$450 million from 2020 to 2021. Healthcare-related engagements in Southeast Asia have deepened. For example, the five-storey Cambodia–China Friendship Tboung Khmum Hospital in eastern Tboung Khmum province was completed on March 7, 2022. In addition, the 11-storey Cambodia–China Friendship Medical Building at the Cambodia–China Friendship Preah Kossamak Hospital in capital Phnom Penh was completed on March 21, 2022.²¹

The Green Silk Road is also another new development. In recent years, China has stepped up efforts to invest in green energy projects, while reducing coal power plants along Belt & Road countries. According to a study by Invesco, Chinese coal-related investments and construction projects almost came to a halt in 2021 and 2022; in contrast, Chinese investments in renewable energy such as solar, wind, and hydropower increased by 50 percent from 2021 to 2022. In Southeast Asia, eight out of ten

19 ASEAN Secretariat. (2020, April). *Overview of ASEAN–China Dialogue Relations. ASEAN Secretariat Information Paper*. Retrieved from <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Overview-of-ASEAN-China-Relations-22-Apr-2020-00000002.pdf>.

20 United Overseas Bank. (2020, December 1). *UOB-HKUST IEMS study reveals growing need for sharper focus on sustainability in Belt and Road Initiative projects in ASEAN*. Retrieved from https://www.uobchina.com.cn/web-resources/about_us/pdf/news20201114_en.pdf.

21 Xinhua News Agency. (2022, March 22). *China-Aided Hospitals Key to Strengthening Cambodia's Health System*. Retrieved from http://english.scio.gov.cn/international/exchanges/2022-03/22/content_78122700.htm.

ASEAN countries have made “carbon neutral” commitments by 2050, while Indonesia pledged to attain carbon neutrality by 2060. Under this policy, Chinese green investments made inroads in many of these countries. In mid-2019, Chinese state-owned enterprise PowerChina financed a 0.5-gigawatt solar farm in south Vietnam. The solar farm was Southeast Asia’s largest when it was completed at that time. In the Philippines, Manila’s full opening of its renewable energy sector to foreign ownership led nine Chinese companies to pledge to invest a total of US\$13.76 billion in its renewable energy sector.²² In the first quarter of 2023, the Philippine Board of Investments approved three offshore wind projects worth a total of approximately US\$6.95 billion.²³ Moving forward, there remains immense potential for ASEAN–China cooperation in the financing of green energy facilities and sharing of green energy transition experience.

Local Government’s Contribution to China–ASEAN Economic Ties

The preceding sections show an examination of China–ASEAN economic ties from a macro national-level perspective. The local government’s contribution to China–ASEAN economic ties should be taken into consideration. Beyond functioning as a mere execution arm of the central government, the local government would actively strengthen China–ASEAN economic ties and lobby the central government for support.

The Guangxi local government, for example, succeeded in lobbying the central government to have the annual China–ASEAN Expo (CAEXPO) permanently held in its provincial capital Nanning city.²⁴ First started in 2004, the event has grown to become one of the largest international trade fairs in China. Since 2014, many countries outside of Southeast Asia were also invited to participate in the event. For example, the 17th CAEXPO held in November 2020 attracted participants from 22 countries. In the last four years (2019–2022), total deals signed during the expo, undeterred by the COVID-19 pandemic, exceeded expectations. According to China’s state media,²⁵ the amount increased from US\$27.86 billion (2019) to US\$40 billion (2020); then it rose to US\$46.59 billion (2021) and to US\$ 59.14

22 Norman, W. (2023, January 9). *Chinese companies Commit US\$13.7 Billion for Renewables in Philippines*. PV Tech. Retrieved from <https://www.pv-tech.org/chinese-companies-commit-us13-7-billion-for-renewables-in-philippines>. & Xiao, Anthony, and Ding, Yifei. (2023, April 4). *Evolution of China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Green Silk Road*. Invesco, Insight. Retrieved from <https://www.invesco.com/apac/en/institutional/insights/fixed-income/evolution-of-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-green-silk-road.html>.

23 Xinhua News Agency. (2023, June 5). *Philippines Expects Chinese Investments in Renewable Energy Projects*. Retrieved from <https://english.news.cn/20230605/404a7a2684274c95bc59f627829b7cd6/c.html>.

24 Li, Mingjiang. (2019). China’s Economic Power in Asia: the Belt and Road Initiative and the Local Guangxi Government’s Role. *Asian Perspective*, 43(2), 273–295. <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2019.0011>.

25 China Daily. (2020, November 30). *China–ASEAN Expo Concludes; Billions in Deals*. Retrieved from <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202011/30/WS5fc4cd1ea31024ad0ba98e77.html>.

billion (2022). Other than the huge worth of deals signed during the expo itself, many other related forums were also held as part of the CAEXPO. One example is the ASEAN–China Business and Investment Summit (CABIS). It is held concurrently with the CAEXPO to encourage government officials and private businessman to exchange views on the economy and network with one another. In addition to the CABIS, many other ad-hoc activities were also held for the same purpose.²⁶ Given the tremendous economic opportunities involved, local governments are also known to be active participants of the CAEXPO. Chongqing, for example, participated in the event for 19 consecutive years to deepen cooperation with ASEAN.

In addition to the CAEXPO, one oft-neglected area is the local government's contribution to the BRI's beginnings and the impact on China–ASEAN economic ties. For example, in the mid-2000s, the Guangxi local government proposed the regional cooperation strategy to strengthen China–ASEAN economic ties. One example is the Pan-Beibu Gulf Economic Zone, which involves many ASEAN countries. Guangxi also pushed for cross-border cooperation projects such as the economic zones with adjacent Vietnam, industrial parks, and the Nanning–Singapore economic corridor. Many of these initiatives that Guangxi pursued strongly were subsumed under the wide ambit of BRI-projects after the BRI was launched in 2013. For example, the Nanning–Singapore economic corridor is now subsumed under one of the BRI's land belt known as the China–Indochina economic corridor.²⁷

As a border province, Yunnan has also actively pushed for China–ASEAN cooperation before the BRI was announced. In 2009, the Yunnan local government leveraged then Chinese President Hu Jintao's brief mention of Yunnan becoming a “bridgehead” between China and its neighbors to promote cooperation. After Hu's speech, the local government mobilized the entire province and lobbied various ministries and the central government for support.²⁸ Many concrete efforts could be seen on the ground at that time. For example, the Yunnan governor was appointed as the head of the Gateway Coordination Office. Subsequently, many local offices were set up to promote cross-border consultation sessions. In 2009, the Yunnan local government sent proposals to the central government for approval to set up cross-border economic cooperation zones to engage with Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. At about the same time, support from the central government was evident, given China's national plan for railway construction also included the construction of the railway to connect between Kunming, Laos, and Thailand and another railway to connect Kunming and Yangon.

26 ASEAN Secretariat. (2020, April). *Overview of ASEAN–China Dialogue Relations*. ASEAN Secretariat Information Paper. Retrieved from <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Overview-of-ASEAN–China-Relations-22-Apr-2020-00000002.pdf>.

27 Li, Mingjiang. (2019). China's Economic Power in Asia: the Belt and Road Initiative and the Local Guangxi Government's Role. *Asian Perspective*, 43(2), 273-295. <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2019.0011>.

28 Li, Mingjiang. (2014). Local Liberalism: China's Provincial Approaches to Relations with Southeast Asia. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 23(86), 275-293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.832530>.

After the BRI was launched, Yunnan continued to support the initiative because many of the BRI's key thrusts (such as improving transport connectivity) were already attempted by its government even before the launch of the BRI. In his study of the Yunnan government's support of the BRI, Summers concluded that the BRI could be viewed as a rather loose policy framework which allows local governments to reach their own local economic targets under a broader national strategy.²⁹ Beyond Guangxi and Yunnan, other local governments such as Sichuan and Chongqing have also contributed to China–ASEAN economic ties by not just supporting the BRI but also lobbying the central government for greater cross-border cooperation with Southeast Asia. Both Sichuan and Chongqing, according to Mierzejewski, attempted to position themselves as China's bridge between Southeast Asia and further northwest, to Central Asia and Europe.³⁰

Beijing's Narrative on Economic Ties

It is important to note that Beijing has been able to spin various diplomatic and political narratives related to its economic ties with Southeast Asia. Beijing highlights three interrelated narratives on substantive economic ties with Southeast Asia: (a) win-win cooperation, (b) neighborhood affinity, and (c) closer economic cooperation to tackle global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical uncertainties, and climate change. President Xi has stated repeatedly that China “will never seek hegemony or engage in expansionism.”³¹ Under this broad assurance, Beijing frames its economic ties with Southeast Asia as part of its “win-win strategy of opening-up,”³² reiterating that relations between countries is “not a zero-sum game.” China's message is that Southeast Asian countries can develop partnerships with China to achieve their developmental goals.

On top of promoting a win-win outcome, Beijing also emphasizes neighborhood affinity with Southeast Asian countries in both official speeches and interactions. It does so by bringing in the notion of shared “Asian values,” creating a sense of mutual bond. Echoing the first narrative and rising above a zero-sum mentality underscore the values of cherishing community, consensus, and morality.³³ To further strengthen this affinity, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi called for further economic cooperation in the realm of tourism, as well as cultural and media exchange.

29 Summers, Tim. (2021). The Belt and Road Initiative in Southwest China: Responses from Yunnan Province. *The Pacific Review*, 34(2), 206-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2019.1653956>.

30 Mierzejewski, Dominik. (2021). *China's Provinces and the Belt and Road Initiative*. Abingdon: Routledge.

31 State Council. (2009, July 30). *Cai wu xin Zhongguo liushi nian duiwai wenhua gongzuo fazhan licheng* [Cai Wu-Sixty Years of China's Cultural Diplomacy]. Ministry of Culture and Tourism of People's Republic of China. Retrieved from www.mct.gov.cn/whzx/ldhd/200907/t20090730_695921.htm.

32 MFA-PRC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China). (2022, July 12). *Wang Yi Talks about the Directions of China–ASEAN Cooperation in the Next Stage*. Retrieved from https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202207/t20220712_10718862.html.

33 Ibid.

President Xi elaborated on these similarities during a high-level summit to commemorate the 30th anniversary of China–ASEAN dialogue relations.³⁴ He explained that both China and ASEAN are home to diverse ethnicities, cultures, and religions. President Xi also referred to “East Asian civilizations” to highlight shared cultural roots between China and ASEAN countries and urged the formation of regional economic partnerships on an equal footing to forge win-win friendships.

Global crises and uncertainties provide the opportunities for Beijing to forge closer economic cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. The outbreak of the pandemic led Beijing to set the stage for deepening China–ASEAN economic cooperation for the post-pandemic era. After an abrupt shift from the zero-COVID policy, Beijing cited post-pandemic economy recovery as an impetus to strengthen China–ASEAN cooperation. In addition, Beijing also played up China–ASEAN relations by emphasizing how both sides joined forces to tackle the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, 2008 International Financial Crisis, and other challenges. Amid the complex intertwining of global supply chains, Washington’s attempts to decouple from China raised grave concerns among the Southeast Asian states. Associating Washington’s strategies with “cold-war mentality” and “zero-sum game,” Beijing launched the Global Development Initiative (GDI) in September 2021 to differentiate its approach from Washington’s.

Although China–ASEAN economic ties deepened substantially in the past decades, China’s narratives did not completely gain acceptance in the ASEAN region. When asked what China can do to improve bilateral relations in the 2023 ISEAS Survey, 47.4 percent of ASEAN respondents expressed that China should make bilateral trade truly mutually beneficial by addressing trade imbalances. The overall percentage of respondents who are worried about the growing economic influence of Beijing remained quite high at 64.5 percent. In comparison, only 34.3 percent of respondents are worried about Washington’s economic influence.

34 MFA-PRC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China). (2021, November 22). *Xi Jinping Attends and Chairs the Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of China–ASEAN Dialogue Relations and Officially Announces the Establishment of a China–ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*. Retrieved from https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202111/t20211122_10451494.html.

The background is a solid blue color with a subtle, abstract pattern of concentric circles and a grid of thin white lines, creating a sense of depth and movement.

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND ASEAN

Socio-cultural engagement is another area that China has been able to leverage to expand its influence in Southeast Asia. Since the commencement of formal dialogue with ASEAN in 1991, China's engagement with the region has steadily grown. However, it was not until 2003 that a significant milestone was reached with the signing of the first Joint Declaration of ASEAN and China on Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity. This landmark agreement paved the way for a notable increase in socio-cultural and educational interactions between the two sides. Subsequently, a five-year action plan was proposed to guide their cooperation in public health, science, technology, education, culture, human resources, social security, environment, local government cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges.

Trend of Growing Cooperation

For two decades, cooperation between China and ASEAN often focused on policy dialogues and ministerial meetings which were attended by relevant officials from all participating countries. Once agreements and platforms were established, the Chinese central government and local governments in China, including Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan, and government-led organizations (including the ASEAN–China Center) would play a pivotal role in driving cooperation through various activities. Examples include training programs for ASEAN professionals, talent exchanges, knowledge and experience sharing, and collaboration between the public and private sectors.

Furthermore, the scope of cooperation expanded to encompass other areas of mutual interest. Examples include poverty reduction, disaster management, smart cities, and sustainable development. The commitment to enhance Sino–ASEAN relations is shown in Table 11, which highlights the progress achieved through joint effort.

Table 11 Structure of ASEAN exports to China, 2011 & 2015

The First Plan of Action (2005-2010)	The Second Plan of Action (2011-2015)
Public Health	Public Health
Science and Technology	Science and Technology
Education	Education
Culture	Culture
Labor and Social Security	Human Resource and Social Security
Human Resources Development	Poverty Reduction
Local Government Cooperation & People-to-People Exchanges	Environment
Environment	Media
Media Cooperation	Disaster Management
	Local Government Cooperation & People-to-People Exchanges
The Third Plan of Action (2016-2020)	The Fourth Plan of Action (2021-2025)
Public Health	Public Health
Education	Education
Culture	Culture and Sports Exchange and Cooperation
Human Resource and Social Protection	Labor and Civil service
Poverty Reduction	Social Protection and Poverty Reduction
Environment	Environment and Sustainable Use of Natural Resource
Media	Media Exchange and Cooperation
Disaster Management	Cooperation in Disaster Management and Emergency Response
Local Government Cooperation & People-to-People Exchanges	People-to-People Exchanges (local governments, youth, local governors and mayors, etc.)
	Smart City Cooperation
	Sustainable Development Cooperation

Source: Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN–China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity.³⁵

35 ASEAN. (2012, June 18). *Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN–China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <http://asean.org/plan-of-action-to-implement-the-joint-declaration-on-ASEAN-China-strategic-partnership-for-peace-and-prosperity/>.

distinct requirements of ASEAN nations, leveraging China's lessons and experiences from its three decades of development. A notable example is China's commitment to share its poverty reduction strategies with villages in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. This endeavor is facilitated through the establishment of the China–ASEAN Poverty Reduction Experts Database, which serves as a platform for knowledge transfer and capacity-building of poverty reduction strategies.³⁶

Furthermore, China leverages its advantages in digital governance to foster cooperation in Smart Cities. In 2019, the ASEAN–China leaders started the Smart City Cooperation Initiative during the 22nd ASEAN–China Summit. Through high-level dialogues, forums, seminars, and knowledge sharing at the government-to-government and business-to-business levels, China–ASEAN collaboration sought to enhance the quality of life for urban residents and to advance social progress. Many challenges had to be addressed in urban planning, traffic management, energy utilization, environmental protection, smart buildings, and digital services. To bridge the digital gap between ASEAN countries and China, pilot programs were carried out between the Singapore government and the Shenzhen government; the latter is known for its expertise in smart city development.³⁷

Additionally, China and ASEAN are committed to aligning their cooperation with the globally recognized Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2021, both sides signed the ASEAN–China Joint Statement on Enhancing Green and Sustainable Development Cooperation. This statement encompasses a range of issues that resonate with the United Nation's 17 SDGs, including ecological conservation and environmental protection, climate change response, poverty eradication, food security, and disaster prevention and mitigation.³⁸

36 Global Times. (2022, June 28). *China, ASEAN to Continue to Strengthen Cooperation in Poverty Reduction*. Retrieved from www.globaltimes.cn/page/202206/1269278.shtml.

37 IMDA (Infocomm Media Development Authority). (2022, November 25). *Eight MOUs Signed at the Third Singapore–China (Shenzhen) Smart City Initiative Joint Implementation Committee Meeting*. Retrieved from <http://www.imda.gov.sg/content-and-news/press-releases-and-speeches/press-releases/2022/eight-mous-signed-at-the-third-singapore-china-shenzhen-smart-city-initiative-joint-implementation-committee-meeting>.

38 ASEAN. (2021, October 26). *ASEAN–China Joint Statement on Enhancing Green and Sustainable Development Cooperation*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <http://asean.org/ASEAN–China-joint-statement-on-enhancing-green-and-sustainable-development-cooperation/>.

Cultural Exchanges

In October 2003, the Chinese Ministry of Culture sent a delegation to participate in the first ASEAN+3 Culture Ministers Meeting and Senior Officials Meeting held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The participants exchanged preliminary views on China–ASEAN cultural cooperation. In 2005, China and ASEAN jointly signed the China–ASEAN Memorandum of Understanding on Cultural Cooperation. In 2006, the China–ASEAN Cultural Forum was held during the China–ASEAN Expo, resulting in the signing of the Nanning Declaration, China–ASEAN Memorandum of Understanding on Cultural Cooperation, and China–ASEAN Cultural Industry Interactive Plan. The signing of these documents led to the deepening of cultural exchange and cooperation between China and ASEAN.

The cultural engagement between China and ASEAN started with exchanges in traditional sectors such as performing arts, visual arts, folklore and literature, and heritage conservation. It was not until the 2010s that Beijing's public diplomacy strategy in cultural engagement became branded as cultural diplomacy, cultural exchange, propaganda, and cultural trade.³⁹ In 2014, amid BRI's debut and both sides celebrating the China–ASEAN Cultural Exchange Year, more collaborations took place to capitalize on cultural engagement. Besides, China also collaborated with ASEAN countries to promote their shared cultural heritage globally. In 2020, China and Malaysia jointly nominated the Wangchuan Ceremony⁴⁰ as the intangible cultural heritage item on the UNESCO list.

Every year, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China and the People's Government of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region host the China–ASEAN Cultural Forum for policymakers, experts, scholars, artists, media practitioners, youth leaders, and civil society organizations from China and ASEAN countries to exchange views, learn from one another's experiences, and share insights on cultural diversity and identity. The forum also showcases the cultural achievements and products of China and ASEAN countries through exhibitions, performances, workshops, seminars, film screenings, book launches, and others. In 2022, the forum gathered about 250 guests, including ministers, deputy prime ministers, and senior officials from China and ASEAN countries.

39 State Council. (2009, July 30). *Cai wu xin Zhongguo liushi nian duiwai wenhua gongzuo fazhan licheng* [Cai Wu-Sixty Years of China's Cultural Diplomacy]. Ministry of Culture and Tourism of People's Republic of China. Retrieved from www.mct.gov.cn/whzx/ldhd/200907/t20090730_695921.htm.

40 Xinhua News Agency. (2020, December 18). *Spotlight: Malaysia Hails Joint Success with China in UNESCO Cultural Bid*. Retrieved from http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/18/c_139600939_2.htm.

Table 12 Themes of the China-ASEAN Cultural Forum, 2014-2022

Year	Theme
2022	Museum Cultural Relics Activation and the Development of Cultural and Creative Industry
2021	High-Quality Development and International Cooperation of Cultural Industry
2020	Cultural Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations
2019	Integrated Development of Culture and Tourism under the BRI
2018	Exchanges and Cooperation on Cultural and Creative Industries between China and ASEAN
2017	ASEAN-China Traditional Arts Inheritance and Development
2016	Exchange and Sharing: China-ASEAN Art Education Cooperation and Development
2015	New Normal, New Partnership: ASEAN Plus China (10+1) Cultural Cooperation Pursuant to the Establishment of the ASEAN Community
2014	The Management and Practice of the International Arts Festival

Source: Historical data from China-ASEAN Center

Under the BRI framework, China and ASEAN joined effort to develop their respective cultural industries. China has been sharing its successful experience in various fields with ASEAN countries. Examples include the development of cultural industries in cultural creativity, animation games, performance and exhibitions, cultural equipment production, the digital cultural industry, and the integrated development of culture and tourism.⁴¹ China aims to strengthen its ties with ASEAN in the cultural industry in four ways: (a) leveraging Chinese capital to integrate ASEAN digital cultural resources, (b) strengthening China-ASEAN cooperation in the digital cultural sector with platforms as the foundation, (c) exporting Chinese business models to cultivate the digital culture in ASEAN markets, and (d) integrating social media platforms to enhance cultural engagement among China and ASEAN countries.⁴²

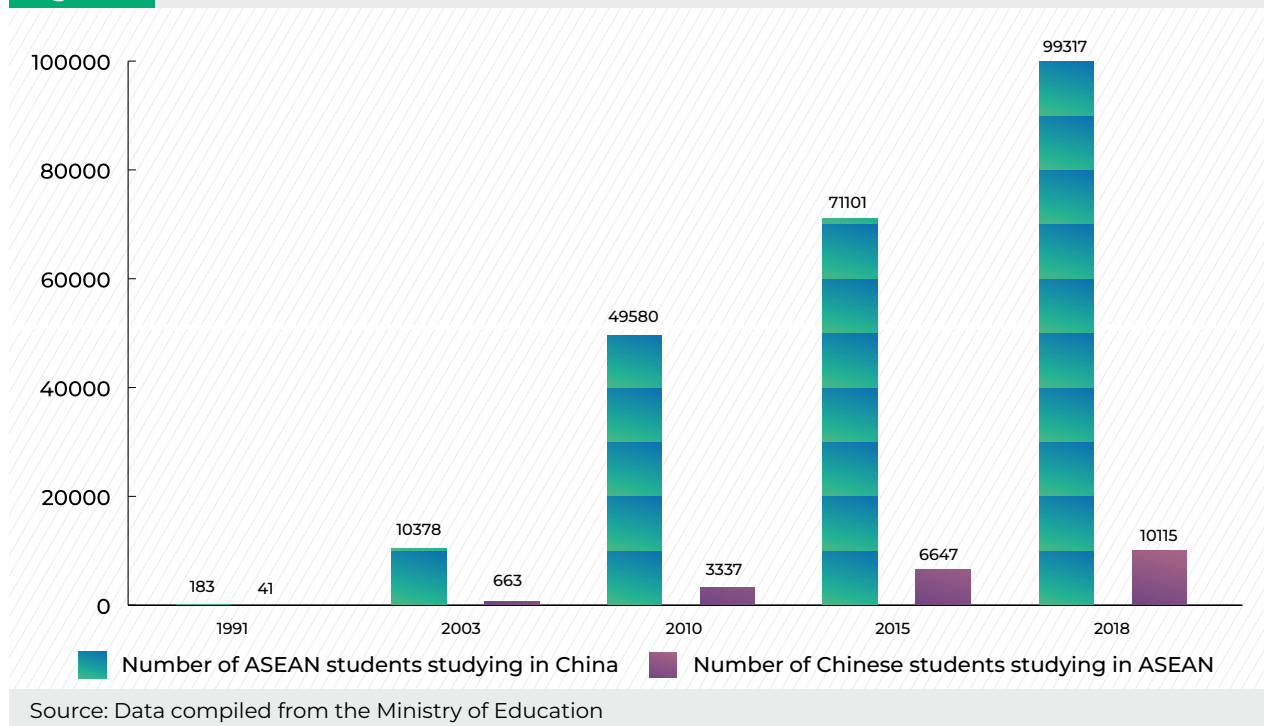
41 China Daily. (2021, July 23). *China, ASEAN Cast Eyes on High-Quality Cultural Industrial Development*. Retrieved from https://regional.chinadaily.com.cn/guangxi/2021-07/23/c_645270.htm.

42 Guangxi Daily. (2021, August 2). *Zhongguo-Dongmeng wenhua chanye hezuo xiang zongshen fazhan* [The Deepening of China-ASEAN Cultural Industry Cooperation]. gx.wenming.cn/zbqx/202108/t20210802_6129884.htm.

Cooperation in Education

In 2010, the foundation and direction for future China–ASEAN cooperation was laid when both sides signed the Guiyang Declaration during the ASEAN–China Education Ministers Roundtable Conference. One of the targets was to enroll 100,000 Chinese and ASEAN students in each other's universities by 2020.⁴³

Figure 11 Number of ASEAN students in China



To achieve the target, China provided various scholarships at the central and local government levels and partnered with ASEAN universities and vocational institution. For example, the China–ASEAN Technical and Vocational Education and Training Consortium (involving 100 vocational education institutions from both sides) was held to facilitate academic exchange and collaboration. According to the latest statistics, the number of ASEAN students studying in China reached 106,000 in 2019.

⁴³ Welch, Anthony. (2012). *China's Southern Borderlands and ASEAN Higher Education: A Cartography of Connectivity*. In *Geographies of the University*, edited by Meusbürger, P., Heffernan, M., Suarsana, L. (Eds.), 567–602. Switzerland, Cham: Springer. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75593-9_18.

Table 13 Scholarship for ASEAN Students from the Chinese Government

Scholarship	Year	Sponsor	Quota	Description
Chinese Government Scholarship	Before 2000	Ministry of Education of China	Varies according to the program and university	A full or partial scholarship under the educational exchange agreements or MOUs between China and other countries, including all ten ASEAN countries
China-AUN Scholarship	2008	Ministry of Education of China	30 Seats/Year	Full Scholarship for ASEAN students who want to pursue their master's degrees or Ph.D. in China
UNESCO Great Wall Program (applicable for most ASEAN applicants)	2008	Ministry of Education of China	25 Seats in 2008, 40 Seats in 2020	One academic year scholarship for undergraduates, master's degree students, and Ph.D. students
Marine Scholarship of China (applicable for most ASEAN applicants)	2012	Ministry of Education of China	Varies according to the program and university	Full Scholarship for coastal countries or regions around the South China Sea, the Pacific, and the Indian Oceans and African developing countries to study in China for a master's or doctoral degree in oceanography or other related specialties.
Chinese Government Scholarship "Silk Road Program" (applicable for most ASEAN applicants)	2017	Ministry of Education of China	Varies according to the program and university	Full Scholarship to support Chinese universities to recruit young candidates for the master's or doctoral programmes from Belt & Road countries.
The ASEAN-China Young Leaders Scholarship	2019	the ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund	20 Seats in 2019, 37 Seats in 2020	Full Scholarship for a master's or doctoral program for young and promising professionals and researchers with at least one-year working experience in ASEAN Member States to study in 22 top universities in China.
Yunnan Provincial Government Scholarship	2004	Yunnan Government	60 Seats in 2004	A partial scholarship for candidates from Southeast Asian countries, including all ASEAN countries, to study at universities in Yunnan Province (with allowances ranging from 6,000 yuan to 20,000 yuan per year).
Guangxi Government Scholarship for ASEAN Students	After 2010	Guangxi Government		A partial scholarship for candidates from ASEAN countries to study at universities in Guangxi Autonomous Region (with allowances ranging from 10,000 yuan to 30,000 yuan per year).
Guizhou China-ASEAN Maritime Silk Road Scholarship	2017	Guizhou Government	Guizhou Government provided 1028 seats in 2017	A full or partial scholarship for candidates from ASEAN countries to study at universities in Guizhou Province
Guizhou Government Scholarship for Southeast Asia	After 2010	Guizhou Government		A full or partial scholarship for candidates from ASEAN countries to study at universities in Guizhou Province

One of the major platforms for education cooperation is the annual China–ASEAN Education Cooperation Week (CAECW). Since its initiation in 2008, it has since facilitated various exchanges and collaborations among educational institutions, students, teachers, and experts.

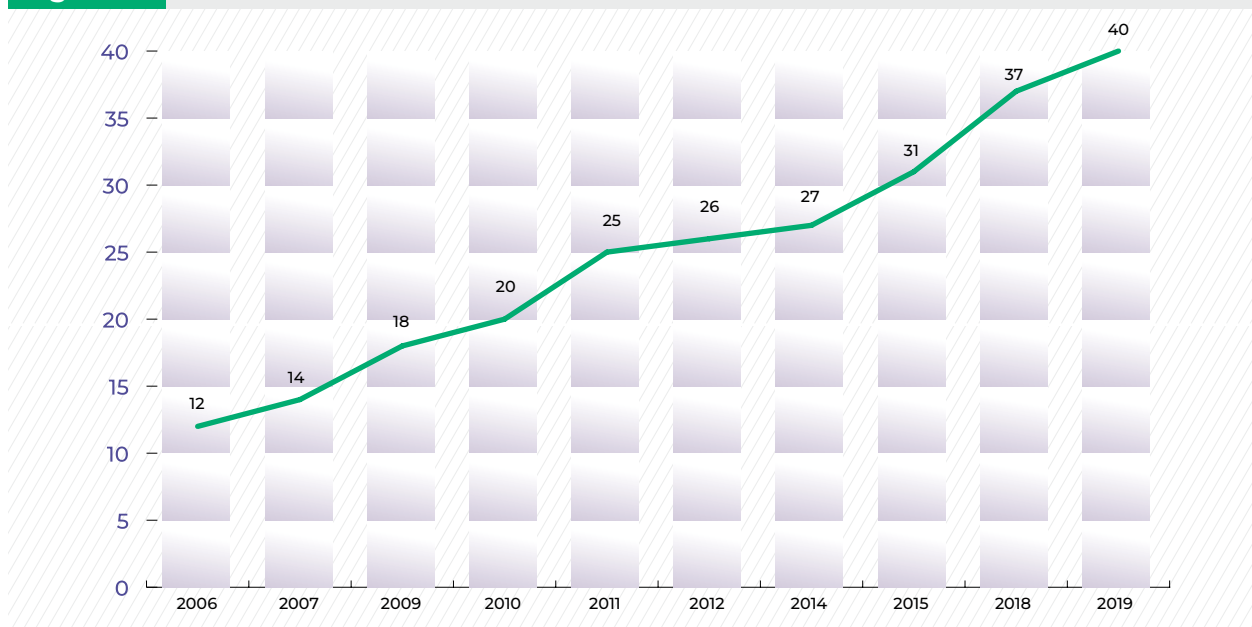
Table 14 Activities under China–ASEAN Education Cooperation Week

Role of CAECW	Examples
The Platform for China–ASEAN University Cooperation	Big Data Education and Talent Development Seminar in 2012 (The 5th CAECW) China–ASEAN University President's Cooperation Forum in 2016 (The 9th CAECW) China–ASEAN Technological University Presidents Forum in 2017 (The 10th CAECW) China–ASEAN University Presidents Forum for Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education in 2018 (The 11th CAECW)
The Platform for China–ASEAN Youth Exchange	“Chinese Bridge” ASEAN Youth Summer Camp in 2017 (The 10th CAECW) The ASEAN Students Football Friendly Game in 2017 (The 10th CAECW) ASEAN Students Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition in 2018 (The 11th CAECW)
The Platform for China–ASEAN Culture Exchange	China–ASEAN International Art Education Cooperation Forum in 2016 (The 9th CAECW) The China–ASEAN Tourism Education Alliance and the China–ASEAN Tourism Education Cooperation Forum in 2017 (The 10th CAECW) China–Thailand Cultural Exchange and Cooperation Forum in 2018 (The 11th CAECW)
China–ASEAN Technical and Vocational Education and Training Expo	China–ASEAN Vocational Education Achievements Exhibition in 2014 (The 7th CAECW)

Source: Historical data from the ASEAN–China Center

Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes (CI), established in 2005 in Singapore and Thailand, are used as platforms to foster cooperation with ASEAN countries in the social-cultural and educational sectors. Currently, there are 40 CIs in ASEAN countries, with Thailand having the most (16 CIs and 9 Confucius Classrooms), followed by Indonesia (6 CIs and 8 Confucius Classrooms), and Malaysia (4 CIs and 7 Confucius Classrooms). Brunei has yet to have any CI or Confucius classrooms, while Myanmar has only three Confucius Classrooms. From 2010 to 2019, the number of CIs in ASEAN countries doubled from 20 to 40. In recent years, universities in the U.S. and other Western countries have been closing CIs. In contrast, ASEAN countries, with the exception of Vietnam, generally welcome CIs because they provide opportunities for studying the Chinese language and culture.

Figure 12 Number of Confucius Institutes in ASEAN

Source: Historical data from Digmandarin.com⁴⁴

In ASEAN countries, CIs offer Chinese language courses and proficiency tests, organize cultural events, facilitate academic exchanges, provide scholarships and study tours, and actively participate in regional initiatives. Additionally, CIs can offer specialized classes to local officials in foreign affairs, immigration, trade, and defense ministries, enhancing understanding between China and ASEAN countries. China and ASEAN nations.⁴⁵

However, the initial stage of establishing Confucius Institutes in ASEAN countries posed significant challenges for the Chinese government. Although the Chinese government explained that CIs are used to promote the Chinese language and culture, impediments come in many forms: domestic political instability, skepticism within host countries regarding the perceived role of CIs as a form of “cultural predation” by China (as seen in Indonesia), and concerns about potential negative impacts on academic freedom within host universities (as seen in Thailand).⁴⁶

44 Dig Mandarin. (2024, February 5). *Confucius Institutes around the World – 2023*. Retrieved from <https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html>.

45 Sim, Dewey. (2021, January 10). *Why Asian Minds Are Open to China's Confucius Institutes*. South China Morning Post. www.scmp.com/week-asia/lifestyle-culture/article/3116782/when-us-anger-rises-chinas-confucius-institutes.

46 Shuto, Motoko. (2018). Patterns and Views of China's Public Diplomacy in ASEAN Countries: Focusing on Confucius Institutes. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 7(2), 124-148.

To overcome these challenges, the Chinese government employed several strategies. First, volunteer Chinese teachers were dispatched to local institutions to teach Chinese before the official establishment of CIs. This approach enhanced the acceptance of CIs. Second, the Chinese government effectively utilized all available channels to achieve its objectives. For instance, in the case of the Chulalongkorn University in Thailand, the Chinese government effectively mobilized Princess Sirindhorn, who expressed interest in Chinese culture then, to overcome opposition to the establishment of a CI. Third, the Chinese government sometimes showed flexibility and willingness to compromise. In Indonesia, for example, the Chinese government agreed to change the name of the CI to the Mandarin Language Center. This change managed to ease local public anxiety over China's cultural predation.⁴⁷ These efforts reflect China's determination to expand its influence and promote the Chinese language and culture within the region, despite the complex dynamics and sensitivities surrounding the CI.

Human Resources Training

China has actively provided training programs for diplomats, young leaders, health executives and professionals, technical officials, as well as socio-political and business elites. Training is conducted by various Chinese institutions, including universities, research institutes, and central and local government agencies. In the past, the lessons focused on a general introduction to Chinese culture and history, the legitimacy of the Chinese political system, and China's economic development. In recent years, more customized and technical training has been given to ASEAN elites, promoting the China Model in global governance, business model, and digital development.

In 2010, the ASEAN Plus Three Training Program on Understanding China was organized by Beijing Foreign Studies University for diplomats and government officials from ASEAN countries, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) who are actively engaged in China-related matters. The three-week program includes two weeks of lectures and seminars conducted by Chinese senior officials and scholars, and a one-week field trip to local places of interest, high-tech enterprises, and cultural heritage sites. Before the pandemic, the program attracted over 150 young officials from ASEAN countries, Japan, and the ROK.⁴⁸ The lectures and seminars focused on a wide range of topics that are closely linked to China's political and economic reforms, China's role in the Belt and Road Initiative

47 Shuto, Motoko. (2018). Patterns and Views of China's Public Diplomacy in ASEAN Countries: Focusing on Confucius Institutes. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 7(2), 124-148.

48 ASEAN-China Center. (2016, October 28). *ACC Participated in the Opening Ceremony of 2016 ASEAN Plus Three Training Programme on Understanding China [Press release]*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from www.ASEAN-China-center.org/english/2016-10/28/c_135786805.htm.

(BRI), and the dynamics of China's foreign relations with ASEAN and with major powers in the world.⁴⁹

Launched by the CCP-led All-China Youth Federation, the ASEAN Young Leaders Training program is a one-month program in China. It was introduced around the mid-2010s to cater to 24 to 40-year-old government officials and representatives of young entrepreneurs from China and ASEAN countries. In 2019, the program focus shifted to building leadership skills among ASEAN youth in entrepreneurship under the theme of "Bridge of the Future." Participants gained exposure to entrepreneurship and leadership skills and delved into Chinese history, culture, politics, and the economy. They also visited various enterprises, government institutions, schools, communities, and rural areas in Guangxi and Beijing.⁵⁰

China has actively provided training for healthcare professionals and executives as part of its efforts under China's Health Silk Road framework. Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through healthcare cooperation was discussed during the 17th ASEAN-China Summit in 2014. At that time, former Premier Li Keqiang pledged to provide training for 100 public health professionals from ASEAN countries. Subsequently, in 2016, President Xi formalized China's proposal by introducing the concept of the Health Silk Road during a visit to Uzbekistan.

The organization of most training programs are supervised by the Health Human Resource Development Center of the National Health Commission, in collaboration with domestic health institutions or hospitals. Participants from ASEAN countries attended seminars and lectures conducted by Chinese scientists and experts. They also visited various health institutions, hospitals, and local clinics to observe the Chinese approach to capacity building to improve public health.

One notable training program is the China-ASEAN Training Program for Public Health Executives. Sixty-two executives from ASEAN countries have been trained between 2015 and 2018.⁵¹ This program, along with similar programs such as the China-ASEAN Training Program for Health Emergency Professionals and the China-ASEAN Training Program for Epidemiology Professionals, enable the Chinese people to share their experience in managing public health crises.

The pandemic has further reinforced China's dedication to the Health Silk Road initiative. In 2020, President Xi reiterated China's commitment to train healthcare professionals from ASEAN countries. The China-ASEAN Human Resources Training Program, which operates within the framework of the

49 The following topics were included in the 2015 program: Sino-American relations, China-ASEAN and Asia-Pacific relations, China's economic development, China's military build-up, legal system in China, education in China, and political system in China.

50 ASEAN Young Leaders. (2019). *ASEAN Young Leaders Training Program China 2019*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from ayltpchina.wordpress.com/.

51 Health Human Resources Development Center. (2022, October 13). *Introduction on the China-ASEAN Training Program for Public Health Executives*. Retrieved from www.21wecan.com/wsrcw/c100309/202210/1000321.shtml.

Health Silk Road, was aimed at training over 1,000 healthcare professionals from ASEAN nations by 2022.⁵²

China has also invested in training programs for ASEAN technical experts in sectors including digital transformation and intellectual property protection. According to the ASEAN–China Plan of Action (2021–2025), the Chinese government will provide more training related to civil service, environment and natural resources protection, and the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to ASEAN elites in the future.⁵³

In 2022, China initiated the China–ASEAN Digital Talents Training Project to train 1,000 professionals from ASEAN countries in digital transformation in three years. This initiative aims to boost ASEAN's digitalization efforts, foster economic growth, and strengthen bilateral relations between China and ASEAN. With their digitalization experiences, Chinese enterprises will share their expertise and technology with ASEAN to bridge the digital divide. China seeks to enhance cooperation and knowledge exchange in the digital economy by collaborating with ASEAN's business elites.⁵⁴

In July 2022, under the sponsorship by the China–ASEAN Elite Scholarship, the Chinese National Intellectual Property Administration organized an IP capacity-building training course for over 30 IP officials and professionals from ASEAN. They became familiar with the latest policies of the Chinese IP system through lectures, case studies, fieldwork, and discussion sessions. Organized by the Sichuan IP Service Promotion Center and Sichuan University, the training provided the platform for Chinese governments, domestic IP agencies, market entities, and research institutions to share their experiences with ASEAN officials. The training fostered understanding and peer interaction on IP policies and commercialization in China.⁵⁵

Media and Public Diplomacy

While China initiated its media engagement as early as 2004, it was not until Xi's era that China intensified its media outreach toward ASEAN countries. Since 2012, President Xi has placed great

52 MFA-PRC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China). (2020, December 27). *Remarks by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at the Opening Ceremony of the 17th China–ASEAN Expo and China–ASEAN Business and Investment Summit*. Retrieved from www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/202011/t20201127_678946.html.

53 ASEAN. (2024). *Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN–China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2021–2025)*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ASEAN–China-POA-2021-2025_Updated-with-ANNEX.pdf.

54 Global Times. (2022, November 16). *China Actively Promotes Digital Paradigm, Follows Win-Win and Inclusiveness Rule to Help ASEAN Progress*. Retrieved from www.globaltimes.cn/page/202211/1279700.shtml.

55 China National Intellectual Property Administration. (2022, July 26). *China, ASEAN Organize Training on IP Capacity Building*. Retrieved from https://english.cnipa.gov.cn/art/2022/7/26/art_1340_176826.html.

emphasis on enhancing China's discourse power (*huayuquan*) within China's foreign policy agenda. Media engagement has emerged as a crucial channel for China to effectively communicate and promote its narrative, commonly known as "telling China's story well" (*jiang hao Zhongguo gushi*).⁵⁶ China's approach involves the establishment of local branches of state-backed media agencies, showcasing China's cultural, historical, technological, and economic achievements, as well as highlighting President Xi's success story through local media platforms. Additionally, China has fostered strong partnerships among Chinese state media and their foreign counterparts, further consolidating its presence and influence in media engagement with ASEAN countries.

The three recurring themes in China's media engagement with ASEAN countries are as follows: (a) the critique of Western narratives, (b) the pursuit of harmonious China-ASEAN relations, and (c) the promotion of China's accomplishments.

Media engagement with ASEAN has always been a key aspect of Sino-ASEAN relations' policy priorities. In November 2004, both parties laid the groundwork for media cooperation when they signed the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Joint Declaration on China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2005-2010). The first action plan has an outline of various areas of collaboration between ASEAN and China in media and information exchange. Examples of such initiatives include establishing a dialogue mechanism for press officials to foster communication and policy exchange, enhancing the ASEAN-China seminar on mass media cooperation, co-hosting film and TV festivals, promoting journalist visits and exchanges, collaborating on film and TV program production, facilitating market access for audio-visual products, providing training opportunities for television and broadcasting personnel, projecting a positive international image for China-ASEAN relations, and organizing a workshop to enhance ASEAN-China mass media cooperation.

China engages ASEAN countries with the aid of the Xinhua News Agency and China Media Group (comprising China Central Television, China Radio International, China National Radio), providing news coverage in multiple languages, producing programs and documentaries to promote the image of China, co-producing content with local media, hosting cultural events, and providing media training for ASEAN professionals. The Xinhua News Agency and China Media Group are two media outlets directly controlled by the Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party. The Xinhua News Agency has its overseas bureaus in the capital cities of all ten ASEAN countries.⁵⁷ Its news service in overseas countries mainly covers China's technology, social, and economic achievements, BRI development, and China-ASEAN cooperation in the local language.

56 Thibaut, Kenton. (2020, August). *Chinese Discourse Power: China's Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition*. Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council. Retrieved from https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/AC_ChinaDiscoursePower_11.pdf.

57 Manila (The Philippines), Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Vientiane (Laos), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Yangon (Myanmar), Bangkok (Thailand), Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei), Singapore, Jakarta (Indonesia), and Hanoi (Vietnam).

Table 15 List of major media collaborations between China and ASEAN

Year	Event	Action
2007	Conference of ASEAN–China Ministers Responsible for Information in Jakarta, Indonesia	Beginning ASEAN–China media cooperation
2008	ASEAN–China Summit Forum on Radio & Television in Beijing, China	Adoption of the Beijing Declaration, making plans for the exchanges and cooperation in the field of radio and television
2008	Signing of ASEAN–China MOU on Information and Media Cooperation	Establishment of a medium to long-term cooperation framework in the field of information and media
2015	Chinese government's issuance of the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road	Recognizing media cooperation as an important part of Belt and Road cooperation with countries along the routes (including ASEAN Member States)
2017	Priority work of the ASEAN–China Centre's work	Inclusion of the information and media as the sixth priority area of the ASEAN–China Centre's work
2018	First ASEAN–China Media Cooperation Forum	The theme of "Innovate Media Cooperation for a Shared Future" aims to promote an institutional platform for exchanging news media between China and ASEAN countries.
2019	The ASEAN–China Year of Media Exchanges	Issuance of Joint Statement on Strengthening Media Exchanges and Cooperation between ASEAN and China: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enhance ASEAN–China government communication on media policies. 2. Enhance news cooperation for mutual understanding and development. 3. Elevate media content collaboration for films, TV, documentaries, and social media. 4. Collaborate on broadcasting high-quality films and TV programs. 5. Promote participation in film and TV festivals in China and ASEAN. 6. Intensify media industry cooperation in technology R&D and equipment production. 7. Encourage media education and training for professionals. 8. Implement effective measures to enhance media cooperation for ASEAN–China partnership.
2020	The ASEAN–China Media Cooperation Forum, the ASEAN–China TV Week, the ASEAN–China Short Video Competition, the ASEAN–China Audio-Visual Communication Forum	Establishing multi-level, multi-channel, and multi-type cooperation, integrating new media during the outbreak of COVID-19.

Source: ASEAN – China Center.⁵⁸

58 See more from China–ASEAN Center. (2021, January 5). *A General Overview of ASEAN–China Media Cooperation* (Updated to January 2021). Retrieved from www.ASEAN–China-center.org/english/2021-01/6430.html.

The China Media Group (CMG) produces programs and documentaries about China and Sino-ASEAN relations. Within ten years, the CMG translated and dubbed over 70 documentaries into ASEAN local languages for broadcast on mainstream television channels in ASEAN countries with the aim of promoting a positive image of China in ASEAN countries. In November 2022, the CMG released two multilingual documentaries, namely “Classics Quoted by Xi Jinping” and “China on a New Journey.” The launch ceremony attracted media representatives from Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.⁵⁹ Besides exporting China’s story, the CMG also worked on a program called AgriToday in collaboration with the Vietnam News Agency and the Voice of Vietnam. Together, they sought to provide information on customized agricultural technology for Vietnam. In 2020, TV stations from China, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand jointly produced a three-episode documentary series on China’s poverty alleviation policies. The documentary series “Home in the Green Mountains and Rivers - Better Days” was broadcast in ASEAN countries in April 2021.⁶⁰

The CMG and the China Film Group Corporation organized cultural events together to provide ASEAN locals with movies via the yearly project Lancang-Mekong Mobile Cinema. In 2019, the project benefited in local cities, villages, schools, military camps, and temple squares in Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia.⁶¹

To promote media cooperation, China also invested in training ASEAN media professionals and journalists. Since 2012, China Media Group (CMG) has organized international training programs for media personnel from ASEAN countries. The media personnel gained insight into news media, communication, program production, media integration, and political party capacity building. Beijing also facilitated media exchanges through joint forums with ASEAN. Since 2014, the China Public Diplomacy Association has been running ten-month training programs for foreign journalists, featuring lectures on Chinese society and internships at state outlets.⁶²

China made attempts to expand its media influence through partnerships and content-sharing agreements with local media organizations. These agreements appeal to local ASEAN agencies as they offer free content for local media. In Thailand, at least 12 news organizations and websites, including TNN24 and the parent company of Khaosod, have signed content-sharing agreements with Xinhua News Agency. Indonesia’s MetroTV signed a similar agreement. In the past five years, the

59 China Global Television Network (CGTN). (2022, November 14). *Multilingual Productions 'Classics Quoted by Xi Jinping' and 'China on a New Journey' Launched*. Retrieved from <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-11-14/-Classics-Quoted-by-Xi-Jinping-and-China-on-a-New-Journey-launched-1eXy3qLeRBS/index.html>.

60 Cision Canada. (2021, July 16). *China Media Group and ASEAN Media Set up Partnership to Boost Regional Development*. Retrieved from www.newswire.ca/news-releases/china-media-group-and-asean-media-set-up-partnership-to-boost-regional-development-891181187.html.

61 China Film News. (2019, December 25). *Outdoor Cinema - The Mekong Journey of Chinese Movies*. Retrieved from <http://xn--fiqs8sr9gzmd215a.net/Html/2019-12-25/2991.html>.

62 Kurlantzick, J. (2022). *Beijing's Global Media Offensive: China's Uneven Campaign to Influence Asia and the World*. Oxford University Press.

Philippines' Presidential Communications Operations Office engaged in multiple agreements with China for content-sharing, joint media production, and media cooperation.⁶³

Except for content-sharing, the local media also publishes articles on China. Articles authored by Chinese leaders and diplomats are most frequently featured. According to ISEAS, from January 2019 to April 2022, 154 articles signed by Chinese leaders and diplomats were disseminated by the local news agencies in Indonesia (The Jakarta Post, Media Indonesia), Malaysia (Sin Chew Daily), Brunei (See Hua Daily News, Borneo Bulletin, Weareunited Brunei), and the Philippines (The Manila Times, Chinese Commercial News).⁶⁴ Articles were translated into English, Chinese, and Bahasa Indonesia. Chinese diplomats in host countries were interviewed by the local media to introduce and explain issues related to China's domestic and foreign policy. Among the ASEAN countries, local media in Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines topped the list in their media interactions with Chinese diplomats. For these interactions, "cooperation," "development," "economy," "international," "support," and "sharing" are the six most frequently used words.⁶⁵

Emerging Conduit – social media

Except for traditional media outlets, China has also been putting concerted efforts to strengthen its presence in ASEAN's social media markets. TikTok has many active users in ASEAN countries. For China, ASEAN can be a good place to export its experience and capacity to produce KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) and develop platform economies. Some of the Chinese KOLs have already created high popularity among ASEAN followers. For example, Ms. Yeah, a vlogger who shares China's food culture, has over ten million followers on YouTube, and they are mostly from ASEAN countries.⁶⁶

In January 2022, China hosted the first China–ASEAN Online Influencers Conference in Fujian Province, China. Government representatives and social media influencers/celebrities from ASEAN countries were invited. The Chinese state media (Global Times) highlighted that ASEAN KOLs are cultural ambassadors who will be storytellers of the China–ASEAN cooperation.⁶⁷

63 Shats, Daniel., and Singer, Peter, W. (2022, May 11). *Four Ways China Is Growing Its Media Influence in Southeast Asia*. Defense One. Retrieved from www.defenseone.com/ideas/2022/05/four-ways-china-growing-its-media-influence-southeast-asia/366742/.

64 Wang, Zheng. (2022). *'Tell China's Story Well': Chinese Embassies' Media Outreach in Southeast Asian Media*. ISEAS Perspective no. 2022/90, 1-15. Retrieved from https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ISEAS_Perspective_2022_90.pdf.

65 Ibid.

66 Reeser, Jonathan. (2022, July). *Money and Minds: Is China Dominating ASEAN Social Media and E-commerce?*. Air University (AU). Retrieved from <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Article-Display/Article/3096006/money-and-minds-is-china-dominating-asean-social-media-and-ecommerce/>.

67 Xu, Liuliu, & Xing, Xiaojing. (2022, January 16). *Online Influencers Conference Highlights Close Ties between China and ASEAN*. Global Times. Retrieved from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1246097.shtml>.

Table 16 TikTok users in seven ASEAN countries (million people)

TikTok Users	109.9	49.86	43.43	40.28	19.3	7.06	2.41
Total Population	281.7	99.8	110	71.8	33.5	17.4	5.98
Percentage	39.0%	50.0%	39.5%	56.1%	57.6%	40.6%	40.3%

Source: DATAREPORTAL⁶⁸

Local Governments in Socio-Cultural Ties

For the past 30 years, local governments in southern China have been actively pursuing sub-regional public diplomacy with ASEAN countries, capitalizing on their geographic proximity, cultural and historical connections, and economic interdependence with ASEAN nations. They serve as agents of Beijing's ambitions in engaging with ASEAN countries. While the central government provides general directions, policies, and frameworks, local governments take on the task of implementation. At the same time, local governments leverage the platform and policy preferences to integrate their local development with ASEAN society. Through "Bring In" and "Go Abroad" strategies, local governments in Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou, Fujian, and Guangdong have cultivated strong socio-cultural and educational engagement ties with ASEAN countries.⁶⁹

Compared to other local governments, the local governments of Guangxi and Yunnan play a highly active role as a result of their geographical advantages and intergovernmental competition. Both provinces share geographical proximity and historical connections with neighboring ASEAN countries such as Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos. For this reason, as Guangxi and Yunnan engage in competitive dynamics, they occasionally imitate each other's approaches to fostering relations with ASEAN countries.

68 See more countries at Kemp, Simon. (2023, February 9). *Digital 2023: Indonesia*. DATAREPORTAL. Retrieved from <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-indonesia>.

69 Liu, Tianyang, & Yao Song. (2021). Trajectories to Becoming International Relations Actors in China's BRI Initiative: A Comparative Study of the Guangdong and Yunnan Provinces. *The Pacific Review*, 34(5), 778-809. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1758757>.

Given its role as the permanent host of China–ASEAN Education Cooperation Week, the Guizhou local government is another significant player in promoting educational ties between China and ASEAN. Through trade relations and local ethnic Chinese communities in ASEAN countries, the local governments of Guangdong and Fujian actively pursue socio-cultural and educational engagement with ASEAN nations.

Motivated by their trade relations, historical links, and geographical advantages, these local Chinese governments have made concerted efforts to strengthen socio-cultural and educational ties with ASEAN countries through sub-regional public diplomacy.

Benefiting from its role as the permanent host of the China–ASEAN Expo (CAEXPO), the Guangxi local government has solidified its position as a critical diplomatic hub, facilitating exchange and cooperation to strengthen China–ASEAN relations. The CAEXPO, proposed by former Premier Wen Jiabao during the Seventh China–ASEAN Summit, was inaugurated in 2004 in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Since 2004, the CAEXPO has been held 20 times.

Initiated as a trade fair, the CAEXPO also serves as the platform for cooperation and exchange in tourism, culture, and education. The CAEXPO introduced the “Charming City” session in 2005 for the public to enjoy food, art, music, and dance from selected port cities from China and the ten ASEAN countries. Besides, under the CAEXPO, the Guangxi local government hosts the China–ASEAN Cultural Forum, China–ASEAN Expo Culture Exhibition, China–ASEAN Animation and Game Exhibition, and China–ASEAN Expo Tourism Exhibition. These events provide the platform for representatives from the public and private sectors in ASEAN countries to build connections with their Chinese counterparts to integrate China’s culture, tourism, and education industries with similar industries in ASEAN countries. For example, a city government in Guangxi has successfully branded and exported its local specialties through these platforms. Liuzhou, a city in Guangxi famous for its stinky rice noodles, has successfully taken the ASEAN market as a springboard to global markets. The Liuzhou government has actively promoted the stinky rice noodles not only in CAEXPO but also at the China–ASEAN cultural and tourism exhibitions.⁷⁰ What’s more, a local animation company in Guangxi, using platforms proposed by the Guangxi local government, has successfully aired multiple works in ASEAN countries and signed agreements with local partners in Thailand and Laos for further cooperation.⁷¹

The Guangxi local government has also been actively building and maintaining its brand, “Studying in Guangxi” (*liúxue Guangxi*). The government organized educational exhibitions in ASEAN countries to attract more ASEAN students to Guangxi. Besides, government scholarships were targeted at ASEAN students. From 2016 to 2018, the Guangxi local government invested 78 million yuan in the ASEAN scholarship program for international students.

70 Guan, Qiuyun. (2021, December 28). *CAEXPO Extended Guangxi’s ‘Rice Noodles Craze’ to ASEAN Market. China–ASEAN Panorama*. Retrieved from en.China-ASEAN-media.com/show-45-1141-1.html.

71 Lu, Xianting, & Qinggang Huang. (2020, November 29). *China Is Deepening Its Cultural Cooperation with ASEAN*. Xinhua News Agency. Retrieved from www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-11/29/c_1126800231.htm.

In 2019, over 1,440 ASEAN students studied at the Guangxi Minzu University, accounting for 93 percent of its international students. Besides, the Guangxi local government provides the connections between local universities in Guangxi and universities in ASEAN countries to promote education alliance. For example, the ASEAN-China Arts College Alliance, supported by Guangxi Education Department, has eight Chinese universities and 11 ASEAN universities.⁷² The Guangxi local government also tries to engage ASEAN countries with vocational training on transportation, trade, accounting, electrical engineering, and others. The Ministry of Education of China and the Guangxi local government organized five China-ASEAN Vocational Education Joint Exhibitions and Forums from 2012 to 2019. The Guangxi local government established a multi-level cooperation system involving governments, industries, enterprises, and schools to promote cooperation in vocational education. One example is the trilateral cooperation between China-ASEAN Vocational Education Research Think Tank, the China-ASEAN Border Vocational Education Alliance, and the China-ASEAN Rail Transit Engineering Vocational Education Group.⁷³

As Beijing's first representative in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), Yunnan province failed to be the host for the CAEXPO. To make up for the lost opportunity, Yunnan repeatedly lobbied Beijing to select Kunming as the host city of the China-South Asian Expo (CAS Expo). In 2013, the CAS Expo was held with overlapping functions and attendees. The CAS Expo's Tourism and Culture sections showcase Yunnan's tourism and cultural resources, new products, and new business models of Yunnan's tourism and cultural development.

The Yunnan local government follows the Guangxi local government's pattern of education engagement. Forums for education cooperation are held to allocate resources for joint education programs and attract more students to study in Yunnan, especially for vocational training in agriculture and tourism, areas in which Yunnan has advantages over its counterparts.

Initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and the government of Guizhou province, the first China-ASEAN Education Cooperation Week (CAECW) was held in Guizhou in 2008. Since then, the CAECW has been held annually in Guizhou. The Guizhou government is the main organizer for over 100 China-ASEAN University Presidents Cooperating for the Future, China-ASEAN Youth Exchange Series, China-ASEAN Culture Exchange Series, China-ASEAN Technical and Vocational Education and Training Expo, and China-ASEAN Education Cooperation and Talent Exchange Fair.

Till 2019, the CAECW has attracted nearly 4,900 colleges, universities, and educational institutions not only from China and ten ASEAN countries but also from nine special guest countries, including Australia, Germany, Kazakhstan, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, Switzerland, and

72 China-ASEAN Center. (2017, March 16). *China Arts Colleges Alliance Established in Nanning*. Retrieved from www.ASEAN-China-center.org/english/2017-03/16/c_136158332.htm.

73 Yan, Ning, & Xu, Mingyu. (2020). A Study of China-ASEAN Higher Education Exchange & Cooperation in the Background of China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership. *Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research*, 146, 246-251. Retrieved from <https://www.atlantispress.com/proceedings/isbcd-19/125941784>.

Uzbekistan.⁷⁴ The Guizhou local government actively uses this platform to build connections between local universities and ASEAN partners; one example is the collaboration between Guizhou University and INTI International University in Malaysia. It also seeks to promote people-to-people exchanges between China and ASEAN countries, especially among young people by organizing the “Chinese Bridge” ASEAN Youth Summer Camp and the Guizhou Government Scholarship for Southeast Asia.

Table 17 China–ASEAN Education Cooperation Week milestones

Year	Milestone Achievements
2008	Guiyang Statements of the University Rector’s Forum of the First China–ASEAN Education Cooperation Week
2009	Guiyang Statement of China–ASEAN Education Minister Roundtable Conference
2010	China–ASEAN “Double 100,000 students mobility plan”
2013	Guizhou government scholarship for Southeast Asia
2016	Joint announcement on China–ASEAN Educational Cooperation Action Plan to support ASEAN Education Work Plan (2016-2020)
2016	Guizhou China–ASEAN Maritime Silk Road Scholarship
2017	China–ASEAN Vocational Education Cooperation Alliance Guiyang Consensus

Many ethnic Chinese in ASEAN countries have ancestral origins in Guangdong and Fujian. Guangdong and Fujian local governments find it easier to establish relations with ASEAN countries through these local ethnic Chinese than through the promotion of economic interdependence with ASEAN countries.

First, the Guangdong local government attempted to engage ASEAN countries by inviting young people. In May 2023, the 20th China–ASEAN Youth Camp was held in Guangzhou City, providing young representatives from ASEAN countries to explore green development, cultural exchanges, volunteer

⁷⁴ SEAMEO. (2019, May). *China–ASEAN Education Cooperation Week*. Retrieved from <https://rihed.seameo.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Appendix-3.China–ASEAN-education-cooperation-week-brochure-0626.pdf>.

experience, innovation, and entrepreneurship under the BRI.⁷⁵

Second, Guangdong and Fujian organized cultural events and festivals that showcase diverse cultures. These events feature performances, exhibitions, and workshops, providing opportunities for cultural exchange and fostering a deeper understanding of mutual traditions and customs. Recently, these events also incorporated the trending concept of digital economies. In January 2022, the Fujian government hosted the first China-ASEAN Online Influencers Conference, inviting KOLs from ASEAN countries to learn more about China and to “tell the China story well” in their countries.⁷⁶

ASEAN's Views of Socio-Cultural Exchanges with China

By and large, cooperation in the socio-cultural and educational domains serves to enhance ASEAN-China relations. Generally, socio-political elites in ASEAN countries who enjoy the benefits of economic ties with China embrace China's efforts to enhance socio-cultural and educational engagement with ASEAN.

Although China has long been building its assertive public diplomacy and some observers have labeled China's behavior as a “charm offensive,”⁷⁷ mainstream elites in ASEAN countries are not concerned about the political influence that China may be able to wield over ASEAN countries.

First, the current relationship between China and ASEAN countries is more positive than the China-U.S. relationship. This situation can blur the boundaries between socio-cultural and educational engagement and traditional security or national security concerns.

In Western countries, CIs are subject to heavy scrutiny and they face allegations that they are serving as a propaganda platform for the Chinese Communist Party. In contrast, ASEAN nations demonstrate a more receptive mindset, as they perceive any potential political influence exerted by these institutes as being offset by the imperative to comprehend the perspective of a crucial trade partner.⁷⁸

75 Teller Report. (2023, May 21). *Youth Representatives from ASEAN Countries Gathered in Yangcheng to Discuss the Empowerment of Youth Development through Scientific and Technological Innovation*. Retrieved from www.tellerreport.com/life/2023-05-21-youth-representatives-from-asean-countries-gathered-in-yangcheng-to-discuss-the-empowerment-of-youth-development-through-scientific-and-technological-innovation.rkecVo-wHn.html.

76 Xu, Liuliu, & Xing, Xiaojing. (2022, January 16). *Online Influencers Conference Highlights Close Ties between China and ASEAN*. Global Times. Retrieved from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1246097.shtml>.

77 Kurlantzick, J. (2006). China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia. *Current History*, 105(692), 270–276. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2006.105.692.270>.

78 Sim, Dewey. (2021, January 10). *Why Asian Minds Are Open to China's Confucius Institutes*. South China Morning Post. www.scmp.com/week-asia/lifestyle-culture/article/3116782/when-us-anger-rises-chinas-confucius-institutes.

Certain elites in ASEAN countries have expressed reservations over the perceived political risks of CIs. Notably, Indonesian elites expressed concerns that the CI could be misinterpreted as an avenue for Chinese “cultural penetration” or as a venue of a “religious sect.” The Chinese government addressed these concerns by rebranding the institutes as Bahasa Mandarin (Mandarin Language Centers), thus facilitating successful CI establishment.

During the waves of closures in the United States and Europe, the first public call to shut down CIs in ASEAN countries was made by retired Philippine Supreme Court Associate Justice Antonio Carpio when he said that China can use CIs to “propagate their historical falsehood about the nine-dash line.” This sentiment was shared by various high-ranking officials in the Philippines, who agree that the CIs were exerting excessive political influence.⁷⁹ However, the Philippine authorities refrained from making any official statements regarding Confucius Institutes.

China has demonstrated remarkable leadership through both its COVID-19-related assistance and its extensive vaccine diplomacy in ASEAN. The ASEAN countries generally viewed China as the partner that provided the most help during the pandemic. According to the State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey, 44.2 percent of respondents pick China as giving the most support to ASEAN, while 18.2 percent of respondents picked Japan, and 10.3 percent of respondents picked the EU.⁸⁰

The growing number of Chinese companies in Southeast Asia’s social media and e-commerce sectors increases the chances of the Chinese government using WeChat and similar Chinese-language social media platforms to influence the local Chinese communities. For instance, Singapore’s Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, delivered a speech urging Singaporeans to exercise vigilance when encountering messages about the Russia-Ukraine war on social media platforms. Some of these messages may be designed to influence Singaporeans’ stance or undermine their trust in the government’s foreign policy decisions.⁸¹

79 Mangosing, Frances. (2020, April 30). *Carpio: Shut down Confucius Institutes until China Accepts South China Sea Ruling*. Inquirer.Net. Retrieved from <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/187338/carpio-shut-down-confucius-institutes-until-china-accepts-south-china-sea-ruling>.

80 Seah, Sharon, Lin, Joanne, Martinus, Melinda, Suvannaphakdy, Sithanonxay, and Thao, Pham Thi Phuong. (2023, February 9). *The State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-State-of-SEA-2023-Final-Digital-V4-09-Feb-2023.pdf>.

81 Lim, Min Zhang. (2022, August 21). *NDR 2022: Be Wary of Social Media Messages on Ukraine War with Ulterior Aims, Says PM Lee*. The Straits Times. www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/ndr-2022-be-wary-of-social-media-messages-on-ukraine-war-with-ulterior-aims-says-pm-lee.

The background of the slide is a solid dark blue. Overlaid on this are several concentric circles in a lighter shade of blue, centered towards the left side of the frame. Additionally, there is a pattern of thin, light blue lines forming a grid of diamonds or squares, which is slightly offset and layered over the circles.

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN CHINA-ASEAN RELATIONS

Although economic and social engagements between China and Southeast Asian countries have helped maintain close relations, highly challenging security problems persist in bilateral ties, primarily due to territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea between China and a few ASEAN states. Although Beijing has sought to strengthen security ties with Southeast Asia by enhancing defense diplomacy and cooperation in non-traditional security matters, many ASEAN countries continue to view China as a threat to regional security. The evolving Indo-Pacific strategic alignments and the various minilateral security arrangements (such as the QUAD and AUKUS) further undermine China–ASEAN security ties.

The South China Sea Issue in China–ASEAN Relations

The People's Republic of China's approach to the South China Sea dispute in its relations with Southeast Asia has become increasingly complex since the 1990s. China claims sovereignty over all land features in the South China Sea, maritime areas and rights from those land features, as well as historical rights within the entire nine-dash line. China's territorial and maritime claims overlap with those of several Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. China has employed various strategies to assert its claims and manage its relations with Southeast Asian countries in the context of the South China Sea disputes. These strategies include diplomatic negotiations, bilateral agreements, economic cooperation, consolidation of presence, coercion, and hard-power assertiveness.

After occupying the entire Paracels in 1974 and a few land features in the Spratlys in 1988, China took control of Mischief Reef in 1995.⁸² This occupation occurred during a period of intense competition among countries for energy resources in the Spratly Islands area.⁸³ The occupation of Mischief Reef marked the first instance of a military clash between China and an ASEAN member state. The clash helped revived U.S.-Philippine military ties.⁸⁴ Soon after the crisis, the US Navy SEALs conducted a joint exercise with the Philippine navy; Philippine President Fidel Ramos denied that it was directed against Beijing.⁸⁵ In the middle of the year, China and the Philippines signed a non-binding code of conduct that called for a peaceful resolution to the territorial disputes, easing tensions.⁸⁶ After years of talks in

82 Council of Foreign Relations. (n.d.). *1895-2023 China's Maritime Disputes*. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/chinas-maritime-disputes>.

83 Fravel, Maris T. (2008). *Strong Borders, Secure Nation Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

84 Zha, Daojiong, & Valencia, Mark J. (2001). Mischief Reef: Geopolitics and Implications. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 31(1), 86-103. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/004723301800000061>.

85 Council of Foreign Relations. (n.d.). *1895-2023 China's Maritime Disputes*. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/chinas-maritime-disputes>.

86 Thayer, Carlyle A. (2013). ASEAN, China and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 33(2), 75–84. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26995402>.

the wake of the Mischief Reef incident, China and ASEAN signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002. The area turned relatively tranquil in much of the 2000 due to the existence of cooperative projects in the South China Sea. For instance, in 2005, after China signed a tripartite agreement on oil and gas exploration with the Philippines and Vietnam, the oil companies of the three countries were engaged in a joint seismic study in a small area in the South China Sea.⁸⁷

In the 2010s, China adopted a more assertive approach in the South China Sea. It intensified its territorial claims and took several steps to strengthen its presence in the disputed waters. One notable development was the increasing deployment of Chinese maritime law enforcement vessels and naval assets to assert its authority and interests. Many conflicts between China and other claimant countries occurred in this decade. In February 2011, Chinese frigate Donguan fired three rounds at Philippine fishing boats close to Jackson atoll.⁸⁸ In May, a clash broke out between the Vietnamese Binh Minh 02 oil and gas survey ship and three Chinese maritime patrol vessels approximately 600 kilometers south of China's Hainan Island.⁸⁹ In 2012, China established Sansha Municipality, a prefectural-level government on Woody Island in the Paracel Islands that claimed the right to administer a group of 280 islands, reefs, and reefs within the Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands), Paracel Islands (Xisha Islands), and Macclesfield bank (Zhongsha Islands). The moves were seen as an effort to further solidify China's administrative control over the disputed territories. The establishment of Sansha was accompanied by measures such as the establishment of a military garrison and the imposition of fishing restrictions in the South China Sea.⁹⁰ These actions further escalated tensions and raised alarm among neighboring countries. After the Philippines and Vietnam criticized China's move,⁹¹ Beijing responded by reiterating its "absolute sovereignty" over the region.⁹²

Some of the most significant events in China's handling of the South China Sea dispute occurred during its territorial dispute with the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal. In April 2012, China took the Scarborough Shoal to retaliate against the Philippine navy blockage of Chinese fishing

87 Embassy of China in the Philippines. (2005, March 15). *Oil Companies of China, the Philippines and Vietnam Signed Agreement on South China Sea Cooperation*. Retrieved from http://ph.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zt/nhwt/200503/t20050315_1334600.htm#:~:text=On%2014%20March%202005%2C%20representatives,South%20China%20Sea%20in%20Manila.

88 Jamandre, Tessa and Files, Vera. (2011, June 3). *China Fishermen in Jackson Atoll*. ABS-CBN. Retrieved from <https://news.abs-cbn.com/-depth/06/02/11/china-fired-filipino-fishermen-jackson-atoll>.

89 BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). (2011, May 30). *Vietnam Accuses China in Seas Dispute*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13592508>.

90 Reuters. (2012, July 22). *China to Formally Garrison Disputed the South China Sea*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-sea-idUSBRE86L08B20120722>.

91 VOA (Voice of America) News. (2012, July 23). *Philippines Slams China's Establishment of Sansha City in the South China Sea*. Global Security. Retrieved from <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2012/07/mil-120723-voa06.htm>.

92 Blanchard, Ben. (2012, August 5). *China Calls in U.S. Diplomat over the South China Sea*. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-usa-southchinasea-idUSBRE87401120120805>.

boats in the area. The Philippines took a bold step in the next year by initiating an arbitration case against China under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Philippines argued that China's "nine-dash line" claim, which encompasses almost the entire the South China Sea, was inconsistent with UNCLOS.⁹³ China refused to participate in the arbitration and accused the Philippines of violating the DOC reached in 2002.⁹⁴ The tribunal ruled in favor of the Philippines in 2016, invalidating China's expansive claims and reinforcing the legal rights of other claimant states. However, China rejected the ruling and continued its assertive behavior in the region.⁹⁵

Beginning around 2013, China embarked on a large-scale land reclamation and construction campaign, transforming several reefs and low-tide elevations into artificial islands capable of hosting military facilities.⁹⁶ On the one hand, China's move enhanced its presence, extended its reach, and strengthened its territorial claims in the region. On the other hand, Southeast Asian nations and other countries criticized China for further destabilizing the region, violating the principles of freedom of navigation and overflight, and encroaching the features within the nearby waters.⁹⁷ China's assertiveness and coercive actions have also strained its relations with Southeast Asian countries. In response, several countries, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, strengthened their partnerships and alliances with external powers, including the U.S. and Japan.⁹⁸ They chose to seek support from these countries to balance China's growing influence and to safeguard their own territorial claims.

Beyond these heavy-handed approaches, there have also been efforts between China and Southeast Asian states to de-escalate conflicts in the South China Sea. In 2002, China and the ten ASEAN states agreed on the DOC after six years of negotiation. The DOC marked the first time Beijing accepted a multilateral approach to the South China Sea dispute, prior to which China insisted on bilateral

93 Rothwell, Donald R. (2015, February 17). The Arbitration between the People's Republic of China and the Philippines over the Dispute in the South China Sea. *Australian National University College of Law Research Paper*, no. 14-48. Retrieved from <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2557871>.

94 Torode, Greg. (2013, September 27). *Philippines South China Sea Legal Case against China Gathers Pace*. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-philippines-idUSBRE98Q0BX20130927>.

95 Philips, T., Holmes, O., & Bowcott, O. (2016, July 12). *Beijing Rejects Tribunal's Ruling in the South China Sea Case*. The Guardian. Retrieved from Philips, Tom, Holmes, Oliver, & Bowcott, Owen. (2016, July 12). Beijing Rejects Tribunal's Ruling in the South China Sea Case. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china>.

96 Wu, Changwei, Huang, Xitian, and Zhang, Yiyi. (2022, November 13). *Zhongguo-Dongmeng jingmao hezuo pengbo fazhan shuoguo leilei* [China–ASEAN economic and trade cooperation has yielded fruitful results]. Government of China. Retrieved from https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-11/13/content_5726651.htm.

97 Seyfort, Serena. (2021, November 26). Explainer: *What Are China's 'Artificial Islands' and Why Are There Concerns about Them*. Nine News. Retrieved from <https://www.9news.com.au/world/what-are-chinas-artificial-islands-in-the-south-china-sea-and-why-are-there-concerns-about-them/3f0d47ab-1b3a-4a8a-bfc6-7350c5267308>.

98 Yamaguchi, Mari. (2021, September 12). *Japan, Vietnam Sign Defense Transfer Deal amid China Worries*. AP News. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/article/technology-china-japan-tokyo-kamala-harris-9bf99b9422489050fcb0dde811741714>.

negotiations with the claimants.⁹⁹ The declaration sought to institute norms for conflict management in the South China Sea to reaffirm peaceful settlement of disputes, promote self-restraint in the conduct of activities, and ensure freedom of navigation.¹⁰⁰ In 2011, China and ASEAN countries agreed on the implementation of the DOC to set further guidelines for resolving disputes.¹⁰¹ In the subsequent years, China and regional countries were engaged in talks for a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea.¹⁰²

China has utilized economic leverage to strengthen its ties with regional states and sway their positions on the South China Sea disputes. Economic incentives, such as investment, infrastructure projects, and trade partnerships, have been employed to foster closer relations with some Southeast Asian nations and to discourage them from challenging China's claims. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, has been a key tool for expanding its influence in Southeast Asia. Through the BRI, China has offered significant infrastructure investments, including port construction and connectivity projects in countries like Cambodia, Malaysia, and Indonesia.¹⁰³ These investments have not only enhanced China's economic influence but have also provided China with potential strategic advantages in the South China Sea, enabling it to secure port facilities and potentially project military power in the region. China's economic statecraft has also helped Beijing practice a divide-and-rule strategy among ASEAN states. A typical example was ASEAN's failure to issue a joint statement at a summit in 2012 when Cambodia served as ASEAN Chair.

Bilateral Security Ties

Understanding the negative impacts of the South China Sea disputes on bilateral relations, China has sought to improve its security relations with ASEAN and ASEAN states since the 1990s, with some progress achieved in the last decade. In the 1990s, the "China threat" narrative had a receptive audience in Southeast Asia. Some regional states were concerned about the possibility of a rising

99 Council of Foreign Relations. (n.d.). *1895-2023 China's Maritime Disputes*. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/chinas-maritime-disputes>.

100 Thayer, Carlyle A. (2013). ASEAN, China and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 33(2), 75–84. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26995402>.

101 Martina, Michael., and Rondonuwu, Olivia. (2011, July 20). *China, ASEAN Set 'Guidelines' on Sea Row, But No Deal Expected*. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-southchinasea/China-ASEAN-set-guidelines-on-sea-row-but-no-deal-expected-idUSTRE76J0YO20110720>.

102 Strangio, Sebastian. (2023, February 23). *China, ASEAN to 'Accelerate Consultations' on the South China Sea Code*. The Diplomat. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/China-ASEAN-to-accelerate-consultations-on-south-china-sea-code/>.

103 Nedopil, C. (2023, December 6). *Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative*. *Green Finance & Development Center*. Retrieved from <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/?cookie-state-change=1686214045837>.

China that will destabilize the region.¹⁰⁴ In this context, Beijing intensified its efforts in improving bilateral ties with Indonesia and Singapore, and other regional countries. It began to engage with ASEAN and actively participate in the various multilateral institutions led by ASEAN. In 1995, the first high-level meeting between China and ASEAN, known as the China–ASEAN Senior Officials’ Meeting (China–ASEAN SOM), was held to strengthen trust and understanding in political and security matters. ASEAN also highlighted the South China Sea dispute during the meeting in an attempt to find a sustainable solution. In 1999, China expressed its intention to join the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty.

In the early 21st century, China implemented various measures in the security domain to build mutual trust, alleviate ASEAN’s concerns, and establish the framework for China–ASEAN security cooperation. In 2002, China and ASEAN signed the Declaration on the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which called for self-restraint in activities that could complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability.¹⁰⁵ In the same year, the two parties signed the Joint Declaration of ASEAN and China on Cooperation in the Field of Non-traditional Security Issues, followed by an MOU to facilitate its implementation in 2004. In 2003 China signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, and the relationship was elevated to a “strategic partnership for peace and prosperity.”

China’s defense exchanges with ASEAN states also expanded in the 2000s. In 2001 China and ASEAN initiated annual Defense Ministerial Meetings to facilitate dialogue, information sharing, and collaboration on non-traditional security issues. China also deepened its defense cooperation with individual ASEAN states, such as establishing the Joint Committee on Defense Cooperation with Thailand in 2001. Improved political and economic trust between China and ASEAN also positively influenced military relations. China signed MOUs on national defense and cooperation with six ASEAN members since 2003, and military exchanges steadily grew.¹⁰⁶ Between 2003 and 2005, China sent 46 defense delegations to nine ASEAN states, while 45 defense delegations from ten ASEAN states visited China. Notably, a mechanism for bilateral defense dialogue was established at the deputy secretary level by China with Vietnam and the Philippines in 2005.¹⁰⁷

The last decade has witnessed an intensified focus on defense diplomacy between China and ASEAN states. Since the inauguration of the new Chinese leadership headed by President Xi in 2012, China has

104 Baviera, Aileen. S. (1999). *China’s Relations with Southeast Asia: Political-Security and Economic Interests*. Makati City, Philippines: Philippine APEC Study Center Network.

105 Governments of ASEAN Member States and China. (2002). *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea: Adopted in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on 4 November 2002*. Accessed March 3, 2024, from <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/database/cil/2002-joint-declaration-of-asean-and-china-on-cooperation-in-the-field-of-non-traditional-security-issues/>. Centre for International Law, November 4, 2002. <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2002-Declaration-on-the-Conduct-of-Parties-in-the-South-China-Sea.pdf>.

106 Wong, Lai Foon. (2007). China–ASEAN and Japan–ASEAN Relations during the Post-Cold War Era. *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 1(3), 373–404. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pom003>.

107 Ibid.

taken a more active approach to develop its security ties with ASEAN. In his speech to the Indonesian Parliament, President Xi called for “comprehensive security, common security and cooperative security” to be jointly upheld by China and ASEAN states for regional peace and stability. The slogan became part of Xi’s overarching proposed China–ASEAN community of shared destiny. Specifically, President Xi highlighted the deepening of cooperation in disaster prevention and relief, strengthening cyber security, combating cross-border crimes, ensuring joint law enforcement, and improving of China–ASEAN defense ministers’ meeting mechanism. Also mentioned was the insistence of China’s preference for peaceful resolution to the South China Sea dispute.

President Xi’s remark has clearly expressed his wish for China–ASEAN security cooperation in a broader range of areas in addition to existing mechanisms. Notably, the vision has largely crystalized through enhanced ties between the two parties over the years that followed. In 2016, China and ASEAN co-chaired the ASEAN Regional Forum Workshop on Strengthening Management of Cross-Border Movement of Criminals, which involved representatives from most ARF members.¹⁰⁸ In 2020 and 2022, China and ASEAN have held ASEAN–China Cyber Dialogues to strengthen cooperation on cyberspace security. In 2022, China and ASEAN reiterated their commitment to pursue the establishment of an ASEAN–China Centre for Emergency Management Cooperation.¹⁰⁹ The establishment of the new institutions between China and ASEAN have demonstrated Beijing’s intention of expanding its security relations with ASEAN, though the effectiveness of those mechanisms remains to be seen.

In the past decade, Beijing has become more motivated to engage ASEAN in the security arena for the purpose of dealing with challenges coming from stronger strategic pressures from the U.S. and various strategic alignments under the Indo-Pacific strategy. Under the new geopolitical situation, one of the main goals of China’s engagement with ASEAN is to compete with Washington’s security initiatives and dissuade ASEAN states from supporting US-centered security arrangements, primarily the QUAD and AUKUS. On the one hand, China managed to engage with ASEAN by expressing support for ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, and by participating in multilateral security dialogues, including the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). China has sought to emphasize the concept of “ASEAN centrality” in regional security affairs, emphasizing ASEAN’s leading role in maintaining regional stability.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, China’s military leaders have held high-level visits, training exchanges, and joint exercises with ASEAN

108 ASEAN Regional Forum. (2016, March 10). *Co-Chairs’ Summary Report of ASEAN Regional Forum Workshop on Strengthening Management of Cross-Border Movement of Criminals*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Annex-31-Co-Chairs-Summary-Report-ARF-Workshop-on-Strengthening-Management-of-Cross-Border-Movement-of-Criminals.pdf>.

109 VNA (Vietnam News Agency). (2022, October 25). *ASEAN, China Steps Up Establishment of Centre for Emergency Management Cooperation*. VietnamPlus. Retrieved from <https://en.vietnietna,amplus.vn/ASEAN-China-steps-up-establishment-of-centre-for-emergency-management-cooperation/240663.vnp>

110 MFA-PRC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China). (2022, July 12). *Wang Yi Talks about the Directions of China–ASEAN Cooperation in the Next Stage*. Retrieved from https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202207/t20220712_10718862.html.

counterparts to enhance mutual understanding and foster closer ties. Such attempts culminated in China's unprecedented joint military exercises with the ten ASEAN states in 2018.¹¹¹

Vietnam and Philippines in China–ASEAN Security Relations

Amid China's expansion of its defense networks in the region, many analysts would argue that the quality and substance of China's defense exchanges with regional countries are much less significant in comparison to those of the United States in the region. Moreover, a few ASEAN countries have stepped up their efforts to balance China by strengthening their military and security cooperation with other major players, primarily the United States. This is particularly the case for the Philippines and Vietnam.

President Biden's visit to Vietnam in September 2023 was a watershed moment in U.S.-Vietnam relations. The two countries elevated their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), the highest level of diplomatic relations that Vietnam has with any other country. This upgrade signals a new era of cooperation between the two countries on a wide range of issues, including security, trade, investment, and climate change.¹¹²

One of the most significant changes in U.S.-Vietnam relations since President Biden's visit is the deepening of security cooperation. The U.S. and Vietnam have agreed to increase joint military exercises and training, and to expand their cooperation on maritime security. For example, the two countries have agreed to conduct more joint patrols in the South China Sea. The U.S. has also provided Vietnam with new military equipment, such as maritime surveillance aircraft. For Vietnam, this is particularly important in the context of China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea.

The U.S. and Vietnam have also agreed to strengthen their economic ties. The two countries are working to conclude a new trade agreement, and the U.S. government is encouraging more US companies to invest in Vietnam. This economic cooperation is mutually beneficial, as it helps to create jobs and expand the economies of both countries. In addition to security and economic cooperation, the U.S. and Vietnam are also working together on a number of other issues, including climate change, human rights, and public health. The two countries have agreed to work together to

111 Lim, Min. Z. (2018, August 3). *Inaugural ASEAN–China Maritime Exercise Held at RSS Singapura - Changi Naval Base*. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/inaugural-ASEAN-China-maritime-exercise-held-at-changi-naval-base>.

112 White House. (2023, September 10). *Fact Sheet: President Joseph R. Biden and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Announce the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/10/fact-sheet-president-joseph-r-biden-and-general-secretary-nguyen-phu-trong-announce-the-u-s-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to promote sustainable development. They are also working to improve human rights in Vietnam and to combat diseases such as COVID-19.

President Biden's visit to Vietnam was a historic event that marked a new chapter in U.S.-Vietnam relations. In recent years, the two countries have made significant progress in deepening their cooperation on a wide range of issues. The CSP upgrade is a testament to the strength of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship and to the shared interests of the two countries.

The Philippines is another regional country that has significantly strengthened military and security ties with the U.S. and other external powers in recent years. Stronger ties can be attributed to a number of factors, including China's growing assertiveness in the region, the Philippines' desire to diversify its security partnerships, and the shared interests of these countries in promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

The U.S. and the Philippines have signed a new Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which allows the U.S. to increase its military presence in the Philippines. The two countries also conducted more joint military exercises and training in recent years. For example, the two countries conducted the largest-ever joint military exercise in 2022, involving over 9,000 troops. The U.S. has also provided the Philippines with over a billion dollars in military assistance since 2015.¹¹³

The Philippines and Japan have signed a new Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), which allows the two countries to share military supplies and services. The two countries have also conducted more joint military exercises and training in recent years. For example, the two countries conducted their first-ever joint naval exercise in 2022. Japan has also provided the Philippines with billions of dollars in development assistance in recent years, some of which has been used to improve the Philippines' military capabilities.¹¹⁴

The Philippines and Australia have signed a new Status of Visiting Forces Agreement (SOVFA), which allows the two countries to exchange military personnel and equipment. The two countries have also conducted more joint military exercises and training in recent years. For example, the two countries conducted their first-ever joint air force exercises in 2022.

Many regional security analysts regard the strengthening of the Philippines' security ties with the U.S., Japan, and Australia as a positive development for the region. The four countries share a commitment to promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, and their cooperation will help to deter China and other potential adversaries.

113 U.S. Embassy in the Philippines. (2022, February 11). *Fact Sheet: U.S.-Philippines Defense and Security Partnership*. Retrieved from <https://ph.usembassy.gov/fact-sheet-u-s-philippines-defense-and-security-partnership/>.

114 Parrocha, A. (2023, February 9). *Japan PM Pledges \$4.6B to Support PH Economic Dev't Plan*. Philippine News Agency. Retrieved from <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1194872>.

The strengthening of strategic relations between regional countries (such as Vietnam and the Philippines) and the U.S. and its allies will likely have a complex impact on China's relations with ASEAN. China views these developments in U.S.-Vietnam relations and U.S.-Philippines relations as a threat to its interests in the region. China has long been concerned about the expansion of US military presence in the Indo-Pacific, and these recent dynamics could be seen as a further attempt by the U.S. to contain China. This could lead to China's attempt to increase its military presence in the South China Sea and other disputed areas, which could raise the risk of conflict between the U.S. and China.

China Promotes Its Security Narratives in the Region

China has employed various narratives to mitigate ASEAN states' distrust and to undermine Washington's rhetoric on the "China threat" or US criticism of China's with regard to a rules-based regional order. These narratives aim to reshape perceptions, enhance China's image, and present an alternative narrative that challenges the dominant US narrative. Amid intensifying U.S.–China rivalry, these narratives have become a significant part of China's soft power to win hearts and minds in Southeast Asia and the rest of the non-Western world. Below are some of the main narratives adopted by Beijing to undermine rival rhetoric and promote a more positive image of China.

First, the narrative of its "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development" emphasizes that China's growing political, economic, and military power would pose no threat to regional stability and global order. This narrative was put forward by China primarily to rebut the "China threat theory" and reestablish China as a non-threatening world power, as the Chinese empire was perceived as less aggressive in the past.

Second, China consistently stresses the principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty in its foreign policy. It positions itself as a champion of state sovereignty and opposes external interference in domestic affairs. By highlighting its commitment to non-interference, China seeks to counter US criticism of its actions in areas such as human rights or territorial disputes. This narrative echoes ASEAN's non-interference principle that avoids criticizing the actions of the government of member states toward its own people,¹¹⁵ and reflects the shared aversion between China and ASEAN toward meddling in the internal affairs of other countries.

Third, China argues for a more inclusive regional order that respects the diversity of political systems and development paths. It questions the US-led order and US emphasis on Western values and norms. Beijing constantly reminds ASEAN leaders that the US alliances and US-led security blocs (such as the QUAD and AUKUS) are divisive and would generate more security tensions in the region.

115 Acharya, A. (2001). Human Security: East versus West. *International Journal*, 56(3), 442–460. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070200105600304>.

Fourth, China takes every opportunity to rebut other countries' criticism of China undermining the "rules-based order" and argues that such rhetoric is a cover for the US pursuit of hegemony.¹¹⁶ China also challenges the US narrative of its indispensable role in maintaining regional stability and order. It labels US actions, such as military interventions and alliances, as destabilizing and interfering in regional affairs.

Lastly, China is wary of the US security strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, most recently represented by the formation of the QUAD and AUKUS, reminiscent of the Cold War alliances. China attributes the rising tensions in the region over the past few years primarily to the persistent Cold War thinking and zero-sum mentality rooted in the mind of US policy-makers, who perceive the world through a binary, friend-or-foe paradigm, promoting a polarized camp-based approach to handling relations between major powers.¹¹⁷

In conclusion, China's security relations with ASEAN and its member states have evolved significantly since the 1990s. China has engaged in confidence-building measures, expanded defense exchanges and deepened non-traditional security cooperation. Since President Xi came to power, China has been more proactive in engaging with ASEAN, while developing security ties in a wider range of areas. Beijing's pursuit of the BRI has added a new dimension to security cooperation, while the South China Sea dispute has remained a significant challenge. China's engagement with ASEAN reflects its strategic interests in the region, its desire for influence, and its efforts to manage potential security challenges. However, differing perceptions and concerns among ASEAN states highlight the complexity of China's security relations in the ASEAN context. Most ASEAN states remain wary of China's growing influence and its potential impact on the unity and autonomy of the bloc,¹¹⁸ and have sought to balance it by maintaining ties with the U.S. or other powers, and developing their own defense forces.¹¹⁹

116 Zhu, Ruiqing, & Yi, Ding. (2023, May 7). *Badao de 'guize' baquan de 'cixu' – qidi Meiguo suowei 'jiyu guize de guoji cixu'* [Hegemonic "rules" and hegemonic "order" – demystifying the so-called "rules-based international order" of the United States]. Xinhuanet. Retrieved from <https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202305/08/WS64582e7da310537989373221.html>.

117 *Guangming Daily*. (2022, August 17). *Meiguo duihua renzhi zhong genshen digu de lengzhan siwei* [The Cold War mentality is deeply rooted in the US perception of China]. Retrieved from https://www.xhby.net/tuijian/202208/t20220817_7662091.shtml.

118 Thim, Michelle. (2016, August 8). *China's 'Divide and Rule' Attitude in Southeast Asia Is Good for No One, Including Itself*. South China Morning Post. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2000792/chinas-divide-and-rule-attitude-southeast-asia-good-no-one>.

119 Reuters. (2023, June 8). *ASEAN to Hold First Joint Military Exercise in the South China Sea*. CNN (Cable News Network). Retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/08/asia/asean-military-exercises-south-china-sea-indonesia-intl-hnk/index.html>.

BRINGING IN THE EU FOR DISCUSSION

The EU and the ASEAN have been in dialogue since 1977. Following the end of the Cold War, their collaborative efforts witnessed significant growth. The cooperation between these two sides aligns with the three ASEAN community pillars.¹²⁰ The EU, with a formidable economic presence in Southeast Asia and a substantial development aid donor, aspires to collaborate with ASEAN and its member states to advance regional integration, promote institution-building, security, democracy, good governance, and human rights.¹²¹

Trajectory of EU-ASEAN Relations

In 2007, the Nuremberg Declaration on an EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership marked a milestone in dialogue relations. The Bandar Seri Begawan Plan of Action subsequently strengthened cooperation. Dialogue relations continued in 2017 to develop with the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action (2018-2022) and the elevation of the Dialogue Partnership to a Strategic Partnership in 2020. The Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership (2023-2027) was adopted in 2022 to further advance collaboration.¹²²

The EU actively engages in ASEAN-led security architecture and mechanisms, including as a founding member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Formal diplomatic relations were established in 2009, followed by EU countries.¹²³ The EU's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia in 2012 enhanced political and security engagement.¹²⁴ In 2015, the EU appointed its first Ambassador to ASEAN and established the Mission of the EU to ASEAN. Increased political and security cooperation reflects the EU's commitment to regional security and stability.¹²⁵

Economic cooperation has been integral to the ASEAN-EU relationship, with the EU as a major trading

120 EU in ASEAN. (n.d.). *The EU and ASEAN: 45 Years of Partnership*. Retrieved from <https://euinasean.eu/the-eu-asean/>.

121 Soutullo, Jorge, Cantell, Samuel, Stanculescu, Cristina and Meier, Airis. (2022, October). *Fact Sheets on the European Union: Southeast Asia*. European Parliament. Retrieved from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/183/southeast-asia>.

122 ASEAN Secretariat. (2023, January). *Overview ASEAN-European Union Dialogue Relations*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Overview-ASEAN-EU-DR_as-of-9-January-2023.pdf.

123 EEAS (European External Action Service). (2022, December 2). *The European Union and ASEAN: A Strategic Partnership*. Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/asean/european-union-and-asean_en?s=47#10058.

124 EEAS (European External Action Service). (2022, December 2). *The European Union and ASEAN: A Strategic Partnership*. Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/asean/european-union-and-asean_en?s=47#10058.

125 EU in ASEAN. (n.d.). *The EU and ASEAN: 45 Years of Partnership*. Retrieved from <https://euinasean.eu/the-eu-asean/>.

partner and FDI source for ASEAN.¹²⁶ In 2021, the EU accounted for 10.6 percent of ASEAN trade.¹²⁷ Long-term objectives which include the ASEAN–EU FTA were relaunched in 2017, together with bilateral FTAs with individual ASEAN member states.¹²⁸ The EU FTA with Singapore and Vietnam has been concluded and entered into force.¹²⁹ Cooperation extends to digital economies, green technologies, supply chain resilience, transportation, and regional connectivity.¹³⁰

Socio-cultural cooperation spans areas such as education, health, disaster management, and sustainable development.¹³¹ Initiatives like the Support to Higher Education in ASEAN Region (SHARE) program and the Regional EU–ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (READI) facility bolster these efforts during 2011 and 2017.¹³² The EU also supported ASEAN in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic through the "Team Europe" approach.¹³³

The EU offers development assistance, capacity building, and regional integration support to ASEAN.¹³⁴ As the world's largest donor of development aid to countries like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam,¹³⁵ the EU has contributed over €250 million to the ASEAN Secretariat and regional integration, with bilateral support to ASEAN Member States amounting to €2 billion.¹³⁶

126 Soutullo, Jorge, Cantell, Samuel, Stanculescu, Cristina and Meier, Airis. (2022, October). *Fact Sheets on the European Union: Southeast Asia*. European Parliament. Retrieved from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/183/southeast-asia>.

127 McAllister, David, & Daniel Caspary. (2022, December 13). *ASEAN and the EU: Beyond the Summit, a Call for Action*. The Diplomat. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/asean-and-the-eu-beyond-the-summit-a-call-for-action/>.

128 ASEAN. (2022, September 18). *The Eighteenth AEM-EU Trade Commissioner Consultation [Joint Media Statement]*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/ADOPTED-Joint-Media-Statement-AEM-EU-18-Consultation.pdf>.

129 Binder, Krisztina. (2020, November 11). *Trade Negotiations between the EU and ASEAN Member States*. European Parliament. Retrieved from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)659337](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2020)659337).

130 ASEAN Secretariat. (2023, January). *Overview ASEAN-European Union Dialogue Relations*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Overview-ASEAN-EU-DR-as-of-9-January-2023.pdf>.

131 Ibid.

132 Ibid.

133 EU in ASEAN. (n.d.). *The EU and ASEAN: 45 Years of Partnership*. Retrieved from <https://euinasean.eu/the-eu-asean/>.

134 ASEAN Secretariat. (2023, January). *Overview ASEAN-European Union Dialogue Relations*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Overview-ASEAN-EU-DR-as-of-9-January-2023.pdf>.

135 Koh, Tommy, & Yeo Lay Hwee. (2020, October 16). *ASEAN and EU: the Untold Story*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Singapore. Retrieved from <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Overseas-Mission/Ministry-of-Foreign-Affairs---Permanent-Mission-of-the-Republic-of-Singapore/Recent-Highlights/2020/10/ASEAN-and-EU-The-untold-story>.

136 EU in ASEAN. (n.d.). *The EU and ASEAN: 45 Years of Partnership*. Retrieved from <https://euinasean.eu/the-eu-asean/>.

Table 18 **Key developments in EU-ASEAN relations since 1990s**

Date	Milestone in ASEAN-EU relations
1994	The EU participated in the first ARF.
1996	ASEAN+3 and the EU established Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)
Late 1990s	The EU provided financial assistance to help ASEAN countries recover.
2003	The EU reassessed its relations with ASEAN and its member states and adopted "A new partnership with Southeast Asia."
2005	ASEAN and the EU cooperated in Aceh Monitoring Mission
2007	ASEAN and the EU started FTA negotiations
2007	Nuremberg Declaration on an EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership
2007	Plan of Action to implement the Nuremberg Declaration on an EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership (2007-2012)
2009	The EU and its member states initiated formal diplomatic relations with ASEAN and started to appoint a Representative to ASEAN.
2012	Bandar Seri Begawan Plan of Action to Strengthen the ASEAN-EU Enhanced Partnership (2013-2017)
2012	The EU acceded to the TAC in Southeast Asia
2015	The appointment of the EU's first dedicated Ambassador to ASEAN and the establishment of the Mission of the EU to ASEAN.

Opportunities and challenges in bilateral relations

Economically, ASEAN is a dynamic market for the EU and European countries, given its rapidly expanding middle class, strong economies, and aspiration to become an economic community.¹³⁷ The EU and ASEAN represent significant markets for each other, with potential for increased market access for European businesses in sectors like infrastructure, renewable energy, manufacturing, and digital technologies. Ensuring better access for EU exporters to the ASEAN market is a priority for the EU.¹³⁸ Engaging with ASEAN and establishing more trade agreements allow EU countries to diversify their economic relationships, increase resilience, and reduce over-dependence on specific markets.¹³⁹ Close trade ties and increased investment between the two regions can lead to better supply chain integration, strengthening resilience and promoting open trade.¹⁴⁰ Collaborative efforts between the EU and ASEAN in areas such as digital economy, green technologies, climate change mitigation, and renewable energy can contribute to sustainable development in the region.¹⁴¹ Close economic cooperation can enhance the transfer of knowledge, technology, and innovation, with EU and European countries acting as significant sources of technology and know-how for Southeast Asian countries. ASEAN countries have demonstrated strong interest in engaging EU and European countries economically as they foresee many benefits from such engagement, including reducing economic dependence on China.

There are also challenges in bilateral economic relations. The first challenge is the diverse economic development in Southeast Asia. ASEAN countries are at different stages of economic development, making it challenging for the EU and European countries to engage uniformly. This also results in varying levels of readiness and capacity for implementing regional agreements and initiatives in each country. Second, geopolitical concerns and tensions in the region can lead to uncertainties in economic development and cooperation and affect the motivation for the EU and European

137 EU-ASEAN. (2022, December 13). *10th ASEAN-EU Business Summit Deepening ASEAN*. Retrieved from <https://www.eu-asean.eu/events/10th-asean-eu-business-summit-deepening-asean-eu-trade-sustainable-development-for-all/>.

138 European Commission. (n.d. -a). *EU Trade Relations with ASEAN. Facts, Figures and Latest Development*. Retrieved from https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/association-south-east-asian-nations-asean_en.

139 Riedel, Norbert. (2015, February 17). The Arbitration between the People's Republic of China and the Philippines over the Dispute in the South China Sea. *Australian National University College of Law Research Paper*, no. 14-48. Retrieved from <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2557871>.

140 Cabinet Office. (2021, March 16). *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.

141 ASEAN Secretariat. (2023, January). *Overview ASEAN-European Union Dialogue Relations*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Overview-ASEAN-EU-DR_as-of-9-January-2023.pdf.

countries to increase engagement. Third, the EU faces competition from China, the U.S., Japan, and other players who are also actively promoting trade, investment, and infrastructure development in the region. Fourth, the EU and Southeast Asia have divergent perspectives on some issues, such as the EU's restrictions on palm oil-based biofuels, which Indonesia and Malaysia consider unfair and discriminatory.¹⁴²

Opportunities and challenges in security ties

There are opportunities for the two sides to further strengthen multilateralism and broaden strategic options. The EU's engagement in Southeast Asia offers an opportunity to promote and strengthen multilateralism. By actively participating in regional security architecture, the two sides can encourage dialogue, confidence-building, and cooperation on shared security challenges. At the same time, the engagement of the EU and closer ties between the EU and ASEAN and ASEAN member states broaden their strategic choices in the context of great power competition.¹⁴³ The two sides can work together to promote regional norms and values. The EU's engagement in security issues in Southeast Asia can promote shared norms and values in the region, including good governance and the rule of law. All these may strengthen ASEAN's response to the security challenges that exist in ASEAN-China ties, primarily the South China Sea disputes.

Also, ASEAN and the EU can engage in combating transnational threats and non-traditional security issues. The EU can collaborate with Southeast Asian countries to address transnational security challenges, such as terrorism, organized crime, and cyber threats. Joint efforts in these areas can enhance the capacity of regional actors to effectively address these threats and contribute to overall regional security.¹⁴⁴ Despite the growth of ASEAN-China cooperation in these areas, China's role in these regional non-traditional security issues is still limited because of distrust and geopolitical concerns among some regional political leaders. The EU can aspire to play a more substantive role in helping ASEAN countries address these security challenges.

Challenges in bilateral security interactions between the EU and ASEAN also exist. Compared to other regional players, such as Japan and Australia, there are some gaps in the implementation of

142 Soutullo, Jorge, Cantell, Samuel, Stanculescu, Cristina and Meier, Airis. (2022, October). *Fact Sheets on the European Union: Southeast Asia*. European Parliament. Retrieved from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/183/southeast-asia>.

143 Seah, Sharon, Lin, Joanne, Martinus, Melinda, Suvannaphakdy, Sithanonxay, and Thao, Pham Thi Phuong. (2023, February 9). *The State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-State-of-SEA-2023-Final-Digital-V4-09-Feb-2023.pdf>.

144 EEAS (European External Action Service). (2018, May 28). *Asia Security Cooperation: EU Increases Engagement on Security in and with Asia*. Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/45299_en.

Indo-Pacific strategies for the EU and European countries.¹⁴⁵ For example, the UK has yet to establish tangible frameworks of cooperation like Australia's ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership or lay out a vision for these strategic policies in the future.¹⁴⁶ Limited military capacity of the EU and its member states can hinder engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁴⁷ There are also different perspectives between ASEAN and the EU on some issues. One such issue is the plight of the Rohingyas in Myanmar. Owing to the ASEAN principle of non-interference in internal affairs, ASEAN can only offer humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees but cannot confront Myanmar on the root cause of the problem. The EU, however, has no such constraint.¹⁴⁸

Increasing competition between the U.S. and China can be challenging for both the EU and ASEAN member states as they attempt to strike a balance amid great power dynamics. Ensuring coherence among the EU member states and coordinating policies might also prove challenging. Not all major EU states have released their Indo-Pacific strategies, and they have varying interests and priorities, which can sometimes lead to inconsistencies in the EU's overall approach. Domestic opposition to the tilt towards the Indo-Pacific region within the EU and European states has led to significant debate. Ongoing geopolitical changes in Europe, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, have fueled arguments that Europe should prioritize regional affairs that are in closer proximity to their borders.¹⁴⁹

In socio-cultural and educational arenas, the EU countries may be able to do more in engaging with Southeast Asia, particularly in the following three areas. First, EU countries can play a bigger role in assisting ASEAN countries in research and innovation. The EU and ASEAN can strengthen existing academic collaborations to enhance research and development (R&D) programs in life sciences and technology. The two sides can deepen existing science and technology R&D partnerships while developing new ones, fostering stronger connections between research and innovation communities. They can further encourage cooperation on research and innovation under Horizon Europe, in alignment with the EU's Global Approach to Research and Innovation.

In the educational sector, the EU and European countries can provide more support for educational

145 Djalal, Dini Sari. (2022, June 28). *A Larger Role from the EU in Southeast Asia: A Perspective from ASEAN*. Hinrich Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.hinrichfoundation.com/research/article/us-china/a-larger-role-from-the-eu-in-southeast-asia-a-perspective-from-asean/>.

146 Edwards, Scott, Rob Yates, and Asmiati Malik. (2022, March 16). *'Tilting' or Toppling: Assessing the UK's Indo-Pacific Policy One Year on*. The Diplomat. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/tilting-or-toppling-assessing-the-uks-indo-pacific-policy-one-year-on/>.

147 Ulatowski, Rafał. (2022). Germany in the Indo-Pacific Region: Strengthening the Liberal Order and Regional Security. *International Affairs*, 98(2), 383–402. Retrieved from <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/98/2/383/6526921>.

148 Koh, Tommy, & Yeo Lay Hwee. (2020, October 16). *ASEAN and EU: the Untold Story*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Singapore. Retrieved from <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Overseas-Mission/Ministry-of-Foreign-Affairs---Permanent-Mission-of-the-Republic-of-Singapore/Recent-Highlights/2020/10/ASEAN-and-EU-The-untold-story>.

149 Crabtree, James. (2023, April 11). *Britain's Surprisingly Enduring Tilt to Asia*. Foreign Policy. Retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/11/uk-britain-tilt-indo-pacific-asia-strategy-review-aucus-cptpp-geopolitics/>.

collaboration in international mobility and exchange (such as the Turing Scheme) and enhance English Language Training (ELT) capability for ASEAN teachers through the UK International Education Champion. The two sides can foster cooperation in human capital development, including training and researcher mobility through the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions program. The EU can continue the new Erasmus+ program, providing ongoing opportunities for academic exchanges of students and teachers between the Indo-Pacific region and Europe, focusing on key policy areas related to green and digital transitions. The EU and ASEAN can work together to promote and strengthen people mobility between the two regions, developing joint degree programs and research studies.¹⁵⁰

Also, there is ample room for EU-ASEAN cooperation in public health. They can collaborate to accelerate development and facilitate the deployment of vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics, including clinical trials and joint research in medicines, in response to current and future health challenges. The two parties can enhance networks and connections for digital health and medical technology. EU and ASEAN countries can improve cooperation in pathogen genomic sequencing by developing regional and bilateral networks for surveillance, training, and capacity building. They can reinforce support for healthcare systems and pandemic preparedness in the least developed countries in the region, promoting collaborative research on communicable diseases within the Horizon Europe research program.

¹⁵⁰ ASEAN. (2024). *Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership (2023-2027)*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ASEAN-EU-Plan-of-Action-2023-2027-FINAL.pdf>.

The background is a solid blue color with a subtle, abstract pattern of concentric circles and a grid of small squares, creating a sense of depth and movement.

POTENTIAL COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND EUROPE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

ASEAN countries are important destinations of Chinese investment and businesses, particularly in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Under this initiative, China has been investing heavily in infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia over the last decade, funding roads, bridges, dams, real estate, and industrial zones. The EU and European countries have also fostered robust economic ties with this region and have provided significant financial support to ASEAN through development cooperation programs.¹⁵¹ Their focus is more on social development in areas such as good governance, agriculture, education, and human rights protections.

For a long time, observers have suggested that Chinese infrastructure projects under the BRI offer few opportunities for third-party involvement. In 2015, China first proposed the idea “economic cooperation among Chinese businesses (including those in the financial sector) and businesses of relevant countries in third-party markets.”¹⁵² This approach aims to cooperate with developed countries to complement each other’s strengths. It serves as a response to avoid vicious competition in international markets, alleviate skepticism regarding the BRI, and realize a win-win situation with the host country. It involves several modes of collaboration, including products and services, engineering, investment, industry and finance combination, and strategic cooperation among businesses.

In June 2015, this concept first appeared in the “Joint Statement on China-France Third-Party Market Cooperation”. Later, China signed third-party market cooperation agreements with 13 developed countries and established cooperation platforms. More than half of these are European countries, including Austria, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.¹⁵³

China–Europe Cooperation in Southeast Asia

The third-party market cooperation between China and Europe involves regions in Africa, Central-East Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. The collaboration between China and Europe in Southeast Asia is quite limited and it is even less than the joint effort between China and Japan. Although the lists of joint projects between China and Europe have not been published online, some known projects have been mentioned in various sources. Several publicly available projects are listed below:

¹⁵¹ EEAS (European External Action Service). (2022, December 2). *The European Union and ASEAN: A Strategic Partnership*. Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/asean/european-union-and-asean_en?s=47#10058.

¹⁵² NDRC-PRC (National Development and Reform Commission, People’s Republic of China). (2019). *Third-Party Market Cooperation Guidelines and Cases*. Retrieved from <https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/tz/201909/W020190905514523737249.pdf>.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

1. China-UK Global Health Support Programme Pilot Project on Maternal and Child Health in Myanmar: share knowledge, provide services and improve service quality of pilot areas.¹⁵⁴
2. The Export-Import Bank of China, the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, the Export-Import Bank of Korea, the Italian Export Credit Agency, and the French Trade Credit Insurance Company have provided financial support for the first and second phases of the Hai Phong Thermal Power Station project in Vietnam.¹⁵⁵
3. In June 2018, the French ENGIE Group and TusHoldings signed a technology innovation cooperation agreement to promote renewable energy in countries along the BRI. The two parties agreed to contribute to the optimization of smart energy services (storage, distribution) in Thailand.¹⁵⁶
4. China Harbour Engineering Company built the Tibar Bay Deepwater Port in Timor-Leste, which was opened in December 2022 and operated by the French conglomerate Bolloré. The Port aims to improve Timor-Leste's logistics services.¹⁵⁷

There are three notable features of China–Europe joint projects in Southeast Asia. First, France is among the European countries that have the most extensive level of cooperation with China in third-party markets (including in Southeast Asia), which is supported by two policy documents and three working groups.¹⁵⁸ Second, the available joint projects involve diverse formats of cooperation. For example, there is cooperation in industry and finance combination between Chinese financial institutions and European institutions in Vietnam; strategic cooperation among businesses of French ENGIE Group and TUSHoldings in Thailand; and cooperation in products and services between China Harbour Engineering Company and the French conglomerate Bolloré in Timor-Leste. Third, the joint projects in Southeast Asia involve infrastructure, health, and environmental protection, covering a limited number of Southeast Asian countries.

154 Han, Christine. (2016, August). *Trilateral Cooperation with China Sharing China's Development Experience through Innovative Partnerships*. UNDP Discussion Paper. OEC. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/dac/dac-global-relations/Discussion%20Paper_Trilateral%20Cooperation%20with%20China.pdf.

155 HKTDC (Hong Kong Trade and Development Council). (2021, May 4). *Di sanfang shichang hezuo de jinzhan, tiaozhang yu duice* [Progress, Challenges, and Countermeasures of Third-Party Market Cooperation]. Retrieved from <https://research.hktdc.com/sc/article/NzMyNzE1NjAw>.

156 Duchatel, Mathieu. (2019, October 7). *Triple Win? China and Third-Market Cooperation*. Institut Montaigne. Retrieved from <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/triple-win-china-and-third-market-cooperation>. & TUSHOLDINGS. (2018, June 26). *A Technology Innovation Cooperation Agreement Is Signed Between China And France*. Retrieved from <http://en.tusholdings.com/h/latestnews/show-58-304-1.htm>.

157 CL Brief (China-Lusophone Brief). (2022, December 14). *Chinese-Built Tibar Bay Deepwater Port in Timor-Leste Officially Opens*. Retrieved from <https://www.clbrief.com/chinese-built-tibar-bay-deepwater-port-in-timor-leste-officially-opens/>.

158 Zhang, Ganyi. (2020, February 24). *A Comparative View of China-Germany and China-France Cooperation*. Upplly. Retrieved from <https://market-insights.upply.com/en/belt-and-road-initiative-a-comparative-view-of-china-germany-and-china-france-cooperation>.

Prospects of China–Europe Collaboration in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia offers significant economic development potential, and both China and Europe maintain long-term relationships with this region. In the context of a global economic slowdown, ASEAN's GDP maintains rapid growth. Meanwhile, this region, especially in some less developed countries, has a huge demand for investment in infrastructure construction and development projects, which bring many opportunities for cooperation between China and Europe.¹⁵⁹

Take China-France and China-UK cooperation in Southeast Asia as examples. China has a geographic advantage in Southeast Asia, and France has technological expertise in fields such as nuclear energy.¹⁶⁰ China-France cooperation could be beneficial for the development of renewable energy in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, Southeast Asian countries have a significant demand for transportation infrastructure. French high-speed railway technology has a pioneering advantage, while China's high-speed railway technology also has advantages in terms of cycle time and cost. There is great potential for both sides to jointly explore cooperation in Southeast Asia for transportation infrastructure.

Regarding collaboration between China and the UK, they also have potential to work together in Southeast Asia in the field of infrastructure construction and international finance.¹⁶¹ China and the UK complement each other: the UK has advantages in design, law, consultancy, and management in engineering, while China has strengths in construction efficiency, engineering technology innovation, supply chain management, and cost-effectiveness.¹⁶² Cooperation between the two countries can satisfy the development needs of Southeast Asian countries. Additionally, the two sides can collaborate in green finance. Governments in Southeast Asia are gradually recognizing the importance of green finance in achieving sustainable development goals.¹⁶³ Green development is also an important part of China's economic transformation and a necessity for the sustainable development of the Belt and Road.

159 Su, Erdou, Jun Xue, and Yang Xu. (2020). Third-Party Market Cooperation between China and Japan in ASEAN under 'the Belt and Road' Initiative: Background, Opportunities and Challenges. *Annual Review of Economics*, 36, 67-81. Retrieved from <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1050568772229109120>.

160 Chow, Loletta. (2019, April 16). *Borderless Win-Win Cooperation in Building the Belt and Road*. EY (Ernest & Young Global). Retrieved from https://www.ey.com/en_cn/china-overseas-investment-network/borderless-win-win-cooperation-in-building-the-belt-and-road.

161 Ibid.

162 Belt and Road Portal. *ZhongYing qianshu 'guanyu kaizhan disanfang shichang hezuo de liangjie beilu* [China and UK Sign a Memorandum of Understanding on Third-Party Market Cooperation], June 18, 2019. <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/94107.html>.

163 ADB (Asian Development Bank). (n.d.). *ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility (ACGF)*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/funds/asean-catalytic-green-finance-facility/overview>.

Challenges

However, there are some challenges in the collaboration between China and Europe in Southeast Asia. First, from the perspective of Southeast Asia, while the region might benefit from the joint projects between China and Europe, there is increasing concern that conflicting interests, misperceptions in intercultural communication, and the adoption of varying industrial standards might harm regional development plans and lead to duplicated infrastructure constructions.¹⁶⁴ Second, in terms of joint projects, there might be a mismatch in the goals pursued by China and its European partners. If European companies are interested in contributing technology to infrastructure projects as subcontractors, third-market cooperation can rely on market forces to succeed. However, if these countries pursue more ambitious and political goals in the host country, agreeing on joint projects may become more challenging.¹⁶⁵ Third, there are also potential difficulties in the host countries, especially considering instabilities in their political and business environments.¹⁶⁶

Significant potential exists for increased collaboration between China and Europe in Southeast Asia. Although some setbacks exist, the successful cases of China and Europe in other regions, such as Africa, show that third-party market cooperation is feasible, and the two sides can facilitate the realization of more joint projects. In addition to joint projects, it is worth mentioning that there are also other initiatives involving China, Europe, and ASEAN countries. The International Platform on Sustainable Finance, launched by the EU and China, along with other six countries, attracts participation from some ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.¹⁶⁷

164 Zhang, Muhui. (2021). Sino-Japanese "Third-Market" Cooperation: Policy Challenges and Case Studies in Southeast Asia. *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, 31(1), 81-106.

165 Duchatel, Mathieu. (2019, October 7). *Triple Win? China and Third-Market Cooperation*. Institut Montaigne. Retrieved from <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/triple-win-china-and-third-market-cooperation>.

166 HKTDC (Hong Kong Trade and Development Council). (2021, May 4). *Di sanfang shichang hezuo de jinzhan, tiaozhang yu duice* [Progress, Challenges, and Countermeasures of Third-Party Market Cooperation]. Retrieved from <https://research.hktdc.com/sc/article/NzMyNzE1NjAw>."

167 European Commission. (n.d. -b). *International Platform on Sustainable Finance*. Retrieved from https://finance.ec.europa.eu/sustainable-finance/international-platform-sustainable-finance_en#members.)

CONCLUSIONS

China-ASEAN relations have undergone tremendous transformation in the past decades. Although China was an insignificant player in Southeast Asian socio-economic issues and security in the early 1990s, Beijing has now emerged as a crucial actor in almost every sector in regional affairs. Some analysts would contend that the regional order, which used to be dominated by the U.S. for decades in the post-WWII era, has split into two parallel structures. In the military and security arena, Washington continues to enjoy dominance in the region. But when it comes to regional economic structure, China is now perceived as a leading power in Southeast Asia. Economic influence has brought China quite significant geopolitical leverages in Southeast Asia and even in the broader Indo-Pacific region. For over than a decade, many policy elites in Washington and Tokyo, and elsewhere, have been concerned about the further expansion of Chinese influence among ASEAN countries. These other major players have also come up with various policies and initiatives to counter Beijing's influence, as those strategic realignments under the Indo-Pacific strategy attest to.

China's domestic economic reforms, the opening up drive, and geostrategic interests all worked together to compel Beijing to adopt a proactive approach in engaging with Southeast Asian countries. Certainly, the dramatic economic growth in China and its ever-expanding external economic outreach in Southeast Asia would automatically help build strong socio-economic ties between ASEAN countries and China. In addition to the market-driven economic interactions, Beijing has been conscientiously implementing a geopolitical strategy which is conceptualized as "using economic engagement to enhance political ties" (*yi jing cu zheng*). Various major economic cooperation projects, including the FTA, RCEP, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation and the BRI, as well as generous Chinese assistance for those regional less-developed countries, were at least partially aimed at creating an asymmetric interdependent relationship between regional states and China. As a result of this asymmetric interdependence, the best strategy that most regional countries could adopt vis-à-vis China is hedging.

Notwithstanding China's formidable influence in Southeast Asia, it is debatable whether China has already become the most influential power in the region. Doubts about the actual level of Beijing's influence in the region can be substantiated by the observation that many ASEAN countries continue to display significant amount

of distrust towards China. It is interesting to note that many policy elites in the region are concerned about China's influence. Beijing's expansive claims and heavy-handed approach in the South China Sea disputes have been the primary source of regional states' distrust of China. This territorial and maritime dispute continues to undermine China-ASEAN relations. China's efforts in mitigating ASEAN countries' apprehensions through defense diplomacy and security cooperation may be partially helpful. Amid regular occurrences of skirmishes and conflicts over energy resources and fisheries in the South China Sea, China will continue face difficulties in making any significant improvements in its security ties with regional states.

The above context of China-ASEAN relations could be a backdrop for the EU and European countries to design their engagement with ASEAN and ASEAN member states. In the past decades, the EU has always played a positive role in Southeast Asian socio-economic development and regional security. In the current context of ASEAN's aim to diversify its strategic relations and engagement, the room for EU-ASEAN cooperation has increased. The EU can indeed leverage its strengths to expand its cooperation with ASEAN and ASEAN states in various broad areas, including capacity building, human resources training, decarbonization, digital economy, innovation, and the promotion of security norms.

China-European collaboration in Southeast Asia has been quite limited. There is only a small number of joint projects between Chinese and European companies. China-Europe cooperation in the region may have been significantly affected by various geopolitical factors. For China, winning ASEAN countries' political support through economic statecraft has always been a crucial geostrategic objective in the context of China's neighborhood diplomacy and in the broader context of Asia/Indo Pacific rivalry with other major powers. There may be other practical obstacles for China-European joint efforts in Southeast Asia because the business actors of the two sides adopt different standards in many respects. Nonetheless, various Chinese policy documents suggest that Beijing has interest in working with European countries in the region. With the current collaboration at a very low level, it may be worthwhile to push for some more China-European joint projects and initiatives in Southeast Asia.

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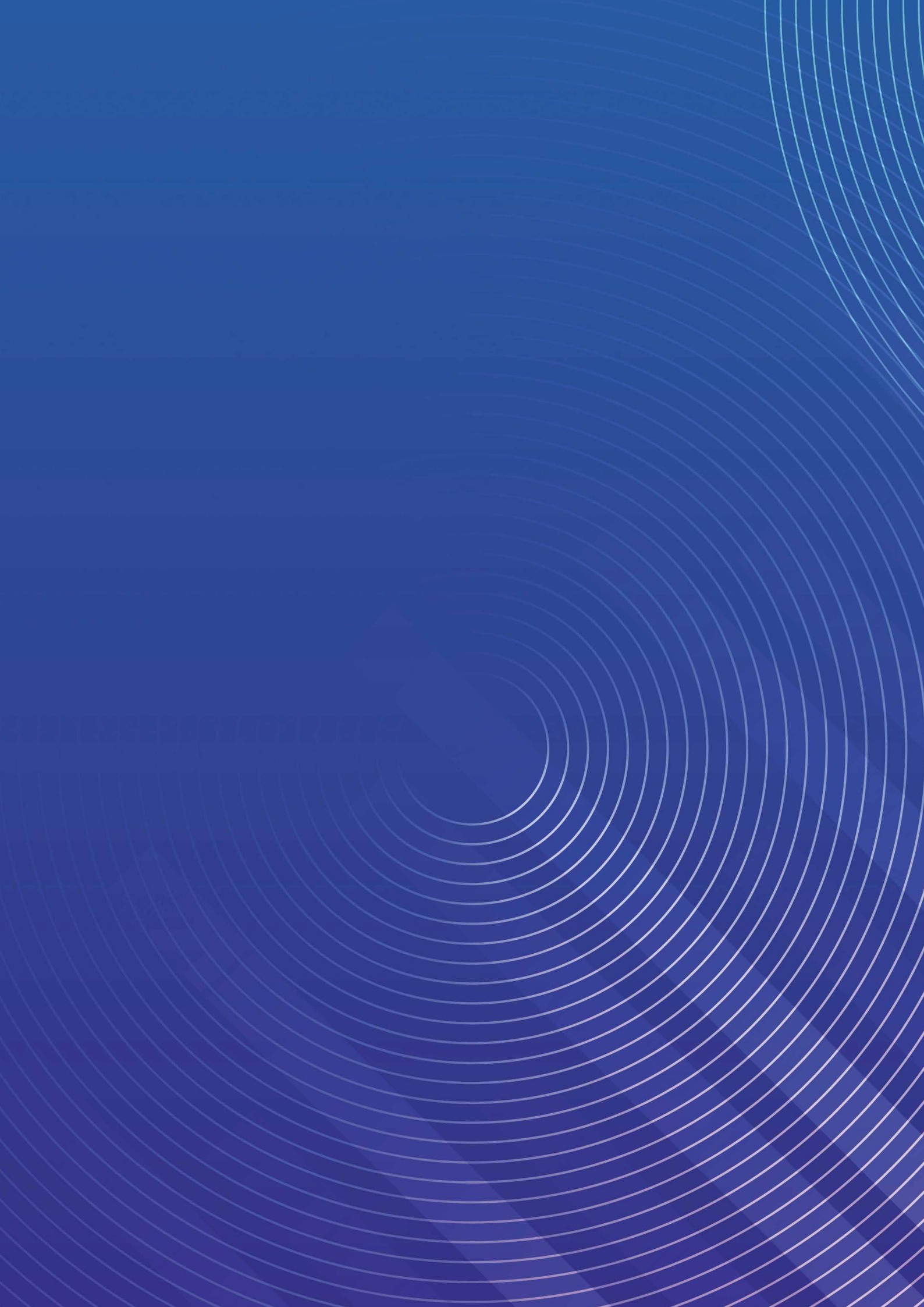
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