



CHAPTER 04

ASEAN-China Relations in the Age of “New Normal”

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INTRODUCTION

Thirty years have passed since ASEAN and China established dialogue relations in 1991. Chinese President Xi Jinping-2020-credited ASEAN-China relationship as “the most successful and vibrant model for cooperation” in the Asia-Pacific region and an exemplary effort to build a community with a shared future for mankind at the opening ceremony of the seventeenth China-ASEAN Expo in November 2020. ASEAN Secretary-General Dato Lim Jock Hoi also commended that ASEAN and China had built up mutual trust, deepened pragmatic cooperation and reinforced the traditional friendship over the 30 years (As of 7 June 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China listed on its website https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1882093.shtml).

Standing on a new historical starting point, both sides are committed to further cooperation on much wider fronts and at a much deeper level. However, against the backdrop of two “new normals”, namely the COVID-19 pandemic and the new type of major-power competition, more wisdom and efforts of ASEAN and China are needed to push forward bilateral relations healthily and sustainably. This chapter aims to offer some insights on the priorities for the 2022 Cambodia’s ASEAN chairmanship and the future of ASEAN-China relations based on taking stock of the 30-year ASEAN-China dialogue relations. It also explores the impact of the “new normal” on ASEAN-China relations.

OVERVIEW OF 30 YEARS OF ASEAN-CHINA DIALOGUE RELATIONS

Cooperation is a resounding message delivered by ASEAN and China in the past 30 years, which has witnessed growing maturity and stability of ASEAN-China dialogue relations. Many milestone achievements have been made so far. First, ASEAN and China attach great importance to their foreign relations. China is the first to join the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), the first to establish a strategic partnership with ASEAN, the first to express its willingness publicly to sign the Protocol to the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-free Zone, the first to express clear support of ASEAN’s central position in regional cooperation, the first to sign FTA with ASEAN, and the first to map out the mid-and long-term development plans of bilateral relations by adopting the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Vision 2030. ASEAN Regional Forum is the second multilateral mechanism China joined after the United Nations (Nie 2013). The support of China to ASEAN centrality and its multilateralism has encouraged other external powers to elevate the standing of ASEAN in their foreign relations and update their relations with ASEAN as well. The Obama administration signed TAC and became an East Asia Summit member in 2010, which is perceived by southeast Asian academia to be a product of the US feeling encouraged by the demonstrative role of China (Kamaruddin and Galas 2020).

At the twenty-third ASEAN-China Summit, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proposed to elevate bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership, and both sides agreed in principle to bring the relations to new heights, which demonstrates their strong commitment to healthy and sustainable bilateral relations in the future.

Second, consultation and dialogue are upheld by ASEAN and China to push forward bilateral relations healthily and stably. China was a country of dialogue and consultation with ASEAN before it became a full dialogue partner with ASEAN in 1996. Politics and security were the main themes of bilateral talks when ASEAN and China started their dialogue relations. Both intended to build an enabling and peaceful external environment for their development at that time. ASEAN-China relations are the most institutionalised among ASEAN's relations with all external partners. Both sides have established a multi-level dialogue mechanism to properly handle and manage the differences to maintain the general direction of friendly cooperation. The Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) was signed in 2002 and has been earnestly implemented since then. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN and China have been continuously carrying out dialogues through both online and offline platforms on implementing the DOC to maintain the peaceful situation in the South China Sea and advance maritime cooperation. The consultations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) have been stalled by the pandemic. However, both sides agreed to restart and expedite the consultation process at the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of dialogue relations between China and ASEAN held in Chongqing, China, in June 2021. In the Co-Chairs' Statement on the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting (2021), both sides reaffirmed that the COC needs to be under international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS, which indicates not only the determination of both sides to maintain the peace in the South China Sea but also China's strategic reassurance towards ASEAN by responding to concerns of the ASEAN Member States (AMS), i.e., making the COC under international law.

Third, practical cooperation is the focus of ASEAN-China relations. The 30-year bilateral cooperation has yielded fruitful results on the fronts of politics and security, economy, society and culture, and people-to-people exchanges. On the political and security front, ASEAN and China are strongly committed to shelving and managing the differences through dialogues and consultation and promote practical cooperation to deepen mutual trust and maintain regional peace and stability. ASEAN and China had their first milestone joint maritime exercise in Zhanjiang, Guangdong province, between 22 and 28 October 2020. "The ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise 2018" marked the first time ASEAN held a military exercise with a single country and the first time China had a maritime exercise with ASEAN as well. The drill aimed at advancing defence and maritime security cooperation between ASEAN and China, and the application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, through which mutual trust has been further strengthened.

China and ASEAN countries have also carried out maritime cooperation by setting aside disputes and pursuing joint development. China is willing to offer more public goods for regional countries, such as all-weather tsunami detection and early warning services. China's international tsunami warning centre, established in 2018 which monitors major earthquake subduction zones in South China, Sulu and Sulawesi seas and provides 24-hour uninterrupted warning services, is the result of practical maritime cooperation between countries in the South China Sea (As of 8 February 2018, the Xinhuanet listed on its website http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-02/08/c_136959424.htm).

Economic ties between ASEAN and China are a highlight of the 30-year dialogue relations. Bilateral trade volume jumped from less than \$8 billion in 1991 to \$684.6 billion in 2020, which witnessed the historical moment of ASEAN and China becoming the largest trading partner of each other. The conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) will further boost the bilateral trade bonds. The alignment between the BRI and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity has been accelerated, and many projects have progressed steadily. The COVID-19 pandemic has further tested the time-honoured good neighbourliness between ASEAN and China. Both have carried out fruitful cooperation on the pandemic fight at bilateral and multilateral levels, drawing the two even closer and laying a greater foundation for building a more solid ASEAN-China community. China has delivered more than 190 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to ASEAN countries (As of 3 August 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China listed on its website https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1897344.shtml). The China-ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund, the China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund and the Special Fund for Asian Regional Cooperation have been set up to deliver tangible benefits to the people. For people-to-people exchanges, more than 65 million personnel exchanges were conducted in 2019, and nearly 4,500 flights went between China and ASEAN countries every week. There are also more than 200, 000 foreign exchange students, and more than 200 pairs of sister cities were formed according to the statistics of 2019 (As of 8 June 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China listed on its website https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1882088.shtml). The platforms and mechanisms such as the China-ASEAN Expo, China-ASEAN Education Cooperation Week, and China-ASEAN Young Leaders Scholarship have played an important role in boosting bilateral people-to-people exchanges.

Many valuable experience and best practices learned and collected from the 30-year ASEAN-China dialogue relations should be carried on maintaining the momentum of the bilateral relations and elevate it to new heights. However, the way ahead is not without stumbling blocks. Two daunting challenges facing ASEAN and China are the COVID-19 pandemic and increasingly tense major power competition. Against this backdrop, the following part discusses the impact of these two challenges on ASEAN-China relations.

THE IMPACT OF “NEW NORMAL” ON ASEAN-CHINA RELATIONS

With the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and major power competition returning to the centre of the US national security strategy at the end of 2017, we have entered the age of “new normal”, which affects ASEAN-China relations in no small way. The age of “new normal” imposes both opportunities and challenges on ASEAN-China relations. Therefore, navigating through it successfully matters a lot to the future of ASEAN-China relations.

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ASEAN-CHINA RELATIONS

Though ASEAN Member States and China have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic fight speaks volumes about the spirit of cooperation and good neighbourliness of both sides. The virus outbreak has cost peoples' lives and livelihoods, and economies of both the AMS and China. China's GDP contracted by 6.8 per cent in the first quarter of 2020 and rebounded consecutively in the following three quarters by 3.2 per cent, 4.9 per cent and 6.5 per cent. 2020 saw the increase of China's GDP by 2.3 per cent (As of 18 January 2021, the Xinhuanet listed on its website http://www.xinhuanet.com/2021-01/18/c_1126994121.htm). With the effective measures implemented, the pandemic in China has been contained successfully and quickly. Though there are sporadic local cases, there has been no massive outbreak in China like what happened in Wuhan in early 2020.

The pandemic has affected the AMS in an all-round way as well (The ASEAN Secretariat 2020). Since April 2021, the AMS has undergone the second pandemic wave, which has gravely worsened lingering economic damage from the first virus wave. According to the International Monetary Fund (2021), the overall GDP of the AMS is projected to increase by 5.2 per cent. Income per capita in 5 ASEAN economies (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam) will still be 6 per cent lower in 2024 than expected before the pandemic. However, the second wave might drag down the economic recovery in the region. The recovery outlook of Southeast Asia, to a large extent, hinges upon controlling the virus, international trade, and the macro-economic policy of AMS governments (Rajah 2021).

The fight against the pandemic has strengthened the cultural commonality, mutual trust, closer cooperation between the two sides, and even provided the new growth points for bilateral relations. The pandemic has triggered reflections on the cultural similarity. While methods and ways of responding to the pandemic vary greatly across different places, they also reflect the cultural commonality of specific regions (Gelfand et al. 2020).

The AMS and China prioritise saving people's life in dealing with the pandemic and respecting science, which has demonstrated the advantage of their cultural commonality, which will lay a solid foundation for building a stronger ASEAN-China community of shared future.

At the bilateral level, China and individual ASEAN countries have conducted close cooperation via both governmental and social channels. When the COVID-19 pandemic first broke out in China, ASEAN countries provided China with both material and emotional support in a timely and effective manner. When the virus spread to ASEAN countries, China was ready to provide its assistance. Under the 10+1 framework, the ASEAN health sector at national and regional levels responded immediately to the outbreak as early as the first week of January 2020 when China shared the first report pneumonia cases to the ASEAN Secretariat. Numerous meetings, video conferences, and discussions between ASEAN and China on how to combat the coronavirus have since been held. The Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on COVID-19 held in Vientiane, Laos, on 20 February 2020 is the first multilateral international conference dedicated to the issue since the outbreak, which demonstrates the readiness of ASEAN and China to embark on multilateral cooperation and sets an example for global cooperation on the fight against COVID-19 (Yang and Li 2020). Currently, in the new normal of the pandemic fight, both sides continue to carry out extensive cooperation on vaccine R&D, production, procurement, vaccination, implementing China-ASEAN Public Health Cooperation Initiative, and China's supporting ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergencies.

Despite the pandemic, ASEAN became China's largest trading partner in 2020, with a trading volume of \$684.6 billion (As of 25 January 2021, the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China listed on its website <http://asean.mofcom.gov.cn/article/jmxw/202101/20210103033653.shtml>). Thanks to the high complementarity in economy and trade between the two sides and policymaking support of the BRI and ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA), the regional economic cycle in the area will surpass the global one, thus deepening the interdependency of countries in the region.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of secure production and supply chains, thereby triggering the shortening of the supply chain. As such, trade ties between ASEAN and China will be further strengthened, given their geographical proximity. While large-scale infrastructure projects in various countries have been somewhat affected by the pandemic, most of the infrastructure projects under construction along the Belt and Road Initiative have been proceeding smoothly, with sufficient measures taken to prevent COVID-19. Steady progress has been made in such projects as the China-Laos Railway, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, the Malaysia East Coast Railway, and the Brunei Hengyi Petrochemical amid the first wave of the pandemic. China and some ASEAN countries also quickly established the "fast track" and "green lane" for essential travels of people and supplies during the pandemic fight in 2020, which has helped stabilise the regional production and supply chains and promote economic recovery.

The digital economy spawned by the pandemic will be a popular focus for cooperation between China and ASEAN. Both sides have made signs of progress in cooperation on e-commerce, technological innovation, 5G networks, and smart cities in recent years. They can go online to actively explore areas of cooperation like telemedicine, medical supplies, trade and business opportunities. Health tourism and the biomedical industry will become key investment areas after the pandemic, with promising projects for China, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and other countries to collaborate on. Online education and shopping are also likely to prosper (Yang and Li 2020). China proposed to formulate the Action Plan for Digital Economy Cooperation, explore the China-ASEAN Digital Security Initiative, and advance technological innovation at the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in celebration of the thirtieth Anniversary of Dialogue Relations (As of 7 June 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China listed on its website https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1882097.shtml). The economic tie between ASEAN and China is also bound to benefit from RCEP. It is estimated that China exports will gain between \$244 and \$248 billion from RCEP, accounting for nearly 50 per cent of the total export growth of all RCEP members. In addition, China's tariff-elimination commitments under RCEP will further accelerate supply chain relocation from China to Southeast Asia. As a result, China's imports of labour-intensive goods from ASEAN countries are set to grow significantly (Zhang 2021).

To a certain extent, the pandemic has become a touchstone for the bilateral relationship, which has raised the community's awareness and pushed practical cooperation across various fields to a new level. Many economic and social scars left by the pandemic badly need joint efforts from both sides to address. As such, cooperation is the only choice for ASEAN and China.

THE IMPACT OF MAJOR POWER COMPETITION ON ASEAN-CHINA RELATIONS

Given its unique geographical locality, Southeast Asia is the core area of the US Indo-Pacific strategy and China's BRI, making it the hotbed of the strategic competition between China and the US. As far as China is concerned, the geographic value of the AMS is self-evident. It is the gateway for China's natural resource imports and maritime routes and an important strategic partner for political, economic, and regional cooperation. As far as the US is concerned, preventing China from dominating Southeast Asia has become its core concern in the region since the return of major power competition to the centre of the US national security strategy during the Trump administration.

The increasing influence of China in East Asia has already become a big concern of the US since the Obama administration, which is also why the Obama administration unveiled the Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy. To respond to the BRI, the Trump administration has built a trilateral partnership for infrastructure investment in the Indo-Pacific with Australia and Japan and a US-Japan Power Partnership in the Mekong. However, few concrete projects have emerged from these initiatives (Dollar, Stromseth, and Finan 2021). In June 2021, the Biden administration and the G7 leaders launched the bold new global infrastructure initiative, the Build Back Better World (B3W), which was also framed as a response to the BRI. Given substantial investments in domestic anti-pandemic and infrastructure by the Biden administration, it remains doubtful that the US can offer an alternative to the BRI.

From the end of the Cold War to the first decade of the twenty-first century is the period of US strategic quiescence in Southeast Asia since the US judgement on East Asia was peaceful and regarded the rise of China as an economic phenomenon (Ott 2013). After that, however, the US changed its view of China. It began to express concerns about China's rising influence in Southeast Asia in 2010. The US policy toward Southeast Asia was immediately made in the context of competition among major powers. With China-US relations having taken a sharp turn for the worse during the Trump administration and continuing its downward spiral after President Biden took office, we are living in a world of a new type of major power competition, which is different from the Cold War between the US and the former Soviet Union, featuring competition on the military and ideological fronts and proxy wars, and the competition between the US and Japan on the economic front.

Biden's administration perceives China as "the only competitor capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system" (The White House 2021). Thus, the US aims to out-compete China by investing in its people, economy, and democracy; restoring US credibility and reasserting forward-looking global leadership; setting the international agenda; working alongside others to shape new global norms and agreements that advance the US interests and reflect the US values; bolstering and defending the US unparalleled network of allies and partners; and making smart defence investments (The White House 2021). Compared with his predecessor's policy toward China, Biden has continued to identify China as a "strategic partner" and taken a tough stance on China while changing the approaches of competing with China to some extent. The Biden administration's policy toward China affects ASEAN-China relations in the following ways.

Biden's South China Sea policy imposes a threat to regional peace and stability. The development and economic growth of the AMS and China have long benefited from a peaceful external environment. Though the South China Sea issue is a big challenge facing ASEAN and China, there is an important bilateral consensus on and increasing bilateral willingness to manage disputes through dialogues and consultations.

Both sides have been maintaining online and offline dialogues and consultations on the effective implementation of the DOC to advance the pragmatic maritime cooperation and are willing to conclude the COC at an early date.

On the contrary, Biden's South China Sea policy disrupts the peace and stability in the region. Biden's administration is outdoing the Trump administration in bluff and bluster with a higher frequency of "Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP)" and reconnaissance aircraft activities and playing up "grey area" tactics. Different from Trump's fighting alone against China, the Biden administration tends to make concerted efforts with its allies and partners to address the "Chinese challenge". In the South China Sea, the Biden administration institutionalises and normalises FONOP and incites anti-China forces among the ASEAN claimants to inflame regional tension. Hying up "Niu'e Reef incidence" in 2021 is an example.

The Biden administration also holds that the South China Sea arbitration ruling is consistent with UNCLOS, binding on China and the Philippines. However, Biden's continuing strategy of demanding China abide by its interpretation of UNCLOS while refusing to ratify it can only fail (Valencia 2021). The AMS resumed confidence in the US after Biden won the 2020 presidential election, while the Biden administration has not brought about peace and stability to the region as what the AMS expected (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute 2021). The South China Sea has become a flashpoint since US-China relations got frosty, and the Biden administration has seemed to not reverse this trend so far. There remains the risk of US-China conflict in this contested area.

Biden's economic, trade, and high-tech policies toward China have undermined the open, free, and stable multilateral trade system and international high-tech cooperation, from which the AMS and China have benefited. Biden's "middle-class diplomacy" is by nature no different from Trump's "America First" doctrine, which echoes Trump's misunderstanding of how the modern economy works. Both are fundamentally mercantilist in their intention to promote more exports but discourage more imports, and both hide behind what they perceive to be an isolationist public attitude (Schake 2021).

Currently, Trump's trade war tariffs remain under the Biden administration. Biden continues to uphold tech-nationalism by implementing a "small yard with a high fence" policy, i.e., prohibiting in a targeted and scoped manner the US investments in Chinese companies that undermine the security or democratic values of the US and its allies and imposing more sanctions on Chinese companies. The US Innovation and Competition Act of 2021, passing the Senate in June 2021, includes \$250 billion investment in R&D and local production of such high-tech as semiconductors and chips (The United States Innovation 2021). The Quad intends to build a "democratic high-tech alliance" in the Indo-Pacific to deal with China (The United States Innovation 2021). Some AMS can benefit from the US-China trade conflict and high-tech companies' relocation from China in the short term.

However, in the long run, the US-China trade war will slow down the global economy and undermine the free and open trade system, hurting the AMS economies. The US-China technology decoupling is also estimated to cause 5 per cent of GDP losses for many economies and forces AMS to face technological bifurcation in the region (Cerdeiro et al. 2021). With the US continuing to look inward and favour protectionism, the US is highly likely to take punitive measures against the AMS, especially those not willing to join “democratic high-tech alliance” if production and supply chains of high-tech companies transition from China to the AMS instead of reshoring to the US.

With China-US competition becoming fierce, ASEAN is also forced to take a side between the two major powers. However, both countries have reaffirmed their support for ASEAN centrality and promise of not pressuring ASEAN to pick aside. The US ambivalent engagement with ASEAN after the end of the Cold War and assistance for or cooperation with the AMS coming with political strings solidify AMS perception of being forced to take side by the US. During her visit to Cambodia in June 2021, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman tried to draw the Cambodian government away from China and push democratic reforms (Strangio 2021). When the US-China competition becomes tenser, the AMS is projected to encounter more pressure from the US. The AMS and China are permanent neighbours. With the increasing influence of China in the region and historical memory of the tributary system, the most recent three years (2019–2021) have witnessed a continued decline of trust in China (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute 2021). As such, ASEAN-China cooperation will be adversely affected. It is a case in point that some AMS have reservations about the Chinese proposal of updating the ASEAN-China strategic partnership to a comprehensive one since they believe relations upgrade means “China first”, a sort of balancing act against the US and a tilt toward the regional giant (Sang 2021).

PRIORITIES FOR CAMBODIA’S ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP IN 2022

To better live with the “new normal”, Cambodia, as ASEAN Chairman in 2022, needs to take into consideration the following tasks as the priorities.

PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF COVID-19 AND ECONOMIC RECOVERY

The prevailing idea among public health experts and epidemiologists is that the coronavirus will never be eradicated. The Economist (After the Disease 2021) published a normalcy index, tracking flights and traffic and retailing across 50 countries and taking the pre-pandemic average as 100. According to the index, the worst performer is Malaysia, scoring just 27. The main reason is that vaccination remains incomplete. COVID-19 has exposed how fundamental health is to share economic prosperity.

As pandemic fight becomes a new normal, prevention and control of COVID-19 and economic recovery will still be Cambodia's first and foremost task as the 2022 ASEAN chair. It is urgent and important for policymakers to consider the means of striking a balance between pandemic control and economic development. Such a balance hinges upon vaccination and a solid public health system since the key factor shaping the recovery outlook of the region and the globe at large is controlling the virus. In this regard, as the 2022 ASEAN chair, Cambodia is duty-bound to push for better regional cooperation among the AMS and between ASEAN and its external partners on vaccine multilateralism, public health capacity building, safer green lanes, supply chain resilience and digital economy. Cambodia also needs to use ASEAN chairmanship to reframe global discourses to counter voices promoting vaccine nationalism and geopolitical rivalry.

Specifically speaking, Cambodia can do the following things: 1). further accelerate cooperation in vaccine-related initiatives in the region by prioritising and investing in the Regional Strategic and Action Plan on ASEAN Vaccines Security and Self-Reliance for 2021–2025; 2). strengthen the state-to-state cooperation in the medical field, especially among medical institutions and universities, to lead in medical education, joint scientific research, training, academic exchanges, and technical cooperation to better deal with a public health crisis; 3). promote dialogues and organise meetings to establish safer green lanes and safe travel bubbles and enact joint protocols and acceptable vaccine types for travel, based on mutual understanding, mutual trust, agreement, and respect; 4). strengthen regional cooperation under RCEP, the BRI, ACFTA and others to maintain an open trade and investment environment such as the smooth functioning of international transport and customs and including provisions for the smooth operations of supply chains into agreement negotiation if possible; and 5). strengthen regional cooperation on the digital economy, especially improving technology infrastructure to support digital platforms that can assist people in meeting their daily needs and activities during the pandemic.

The pandemic offers new opportunities for ASEAN-China cooperation. More importantly, both sides are willing to work together to take on challenges and embrace opportunities. The areas of cooperation have been formulated in the newly adopted Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2021–2025). It is imperative for both ASEAN and China to fully implement this action plan in the five years to come. ASEAN could leverage China's new dual-cycle development pattern, the conclusion of RCEP and the momentum of China's economic recovery to promote its priority development agendas.

STICK TO AN OPEN AND INCLUSIVE REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Openness and inclusiveness are the secret of ASEAN's success. Being open and inclusive becomes even more precious for ASEAN today when it has encountered the tensest ever major power competition since the end of the cold war. Major powers, not limited to China and the US, such as India, the EU, Japan, the UK, ROK, and Russia, have proposed several cooperation initiatives in the region. Such a scenario benefits that more countries attach great importance to southeast Asia in their foreign policy agenda. However, the challenge is to align these initiatives favouring ASEAN, especially since some initiators see others as a threat. ASEAN states are ready to play a role as “an honest broker” in ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which sends the outside world a positive signal that ASEAN intends to play an even more proactive and constructive role in tackling the increasingly fierce major power relations in the region. ASEAN is a critical pillar for regional cooperation. In this connection, Cambodia's key to leading ASEAN in 2022 to serve as an honest broker lies in pursuing an open and inclusive regional architecture and further diversifying ASEAN's external partners while maintaining ASEAN's autonomy.

There exist extensive consensuses between ASEAN and China on open and inclusive regional architecture, open and free trade system, inclusive multilateralism, and managing differences through dialogues and consultations. China enjoys many firsts in developing and strengthening its relations with ASEAN. By doing so, China can contribute more to regional development, encouraging others to upgrade their relations with ASEAN and deepen their cooperation with ASEAN. In the age of new normal, consensuses between ASEAN and China should be further consolidated and expanded for ASEAN-China relations to continue to serve its demonstrative roles among all ASEAN foreign relations.

Choosing a side is not the DNA of ASEAN, and China has no intention to push ASEAN to do it either. ASEAN-China cooperation is not exclusive and not a type of cooperation among alliances targeting the third party. The BRI proposed by China is by nature inclusive, and China even welcomed the US to join when it proposed the BRI in 2013.

China is also open to initiatives launched by other countries, such as the CPTPP. ASEAN-China economic ties register historic growth, thanks to keeping the market open despite the US-China trade war and the pandemic. The conclusion of RCEP is an excellent example of ASEAN's and China's strong commitments to an open, transparent, and fair multilateral trade system. It will certainly deliver tangible benefits to both sides.

Facing major power competition and some countries' inward-looking and protectionism, the AMS refuse to take a side between major powers, continue to open the market and even much wider, and are strongly committed to building an open and inclusive regional regime by engaging more external partners. As such, China needs to support the role ASEAN intends to play by enhancing third-party cooperation in Southeast Asia and engaging more partners, especially the partners who intend to work with China but are reluctant to endorse the BRI. The BRI features openness, inclusiveness and multilateralism, and China is willing to cooperate with countries, including the US, under the framework of ASEAN. In this regard, the role of ASEAN as an honest broker and strategic bridge is highly commended by China. ASEAN could play an important role in shaping the China-US dynamic in the region, since neither country can dominate the region.

SAFEGUARD A PEACEFUL AND ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT IN THE REGION

ASEAN's development and prosperity have been attributed to the long peace maintained by the regional countries since the end of the Cold War. However, with major power competition becoming tenser, the peace and stability in the region are being jeopardised. The US and its allies have started to increase their military activities in the South China Sea since the Trump administration. However, the same period witnessed the increasing willingness of both ASEAN and China to maintain the peace and stability of the region by fully implementing the DOC and pushing forward COC negotiations despite the pandemic. In the Co-Chairs' Statement on the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 2021, China has made strategic reassurance to ASEAN once again by reaffirming that the COC needs to be under international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS. China is also willing to expand practical maritime cooperation with ASEAN such as blue economy, marine environmental protection, fishery resource conservation, and maritime disaster prevention and mitigation (As of 7 June 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China listed on its website https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1882097.shtml). As such, it is crystally clear that regional peace and stability is put at high risk by the party coming from outside the region.

What matters for Cambodia when assuming the 2022 ASEAN chairmanship is to lead in the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in the South China Sea. David C. Kang (2017, 3) argued, “the East Asian reality runs counter a largely Western narrative that views China’s rise as a threat and the region as increasingly unstable.” It is a great boon for the people in the region that the AMS see the rise of China as an opportunity for their development. China has not occupied an inch of the territory of other countries in the process of its rapid rise since the late 1970s, which is solid evidence of its peaceful rise. It is also self-evident that China always upholds “common prosperity” when it develops itself. Moreover, China shares the same culture, priorities, and regional perceptions with the AMS, such as putting people first in governance, prioritising economic growth and social integration in their social development, and desiring an open and inclusive regional architecture. As the 2022 ASEAN chair, Cambodia could leverage its role to construct the common regional narrative by communicating our shared culture, priorities, and regional perceptions to the countries from outside the region. After all, any country with intrusive attempts at military-first leadership is doomed to fail in the region.

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