

# Strengthening the People-to-People Track to Enhance Mutual Political Trust Among China and ASEAN

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On the whole, the future is bright for ASEAN-China cooperation and integration for as long as the positive developments in economic, political, and security relations are allowed to move forward while some strategic issues are being addressed with utmost caution, patience, and flexibility.

Developments in ASEAN-China relations are unprecedented considering that many agreements have been forged in so short a time since joint dialogues whether multilateral or bilateral were formally begun in 1991. In just 22 years, ASEAN-China relations have achieved qualitative leaps advancing from regular dialogues and summits to formal agreements and mechanisms while forging a common response to non-traditional problems. The scope of cooperation has been broadened to include at least 11 priority areas including agriculture, investment, energy, transport, public health, culture, tourism, environment, as well as information and communication technology. In contrast, European regional cooperation went through a full length of more than 60 years – more than half of it during the Cold War - and today the European Union continues to be confronted by how to maintain regional stability as a result of the lingering economic recession in some member-countries, among other challenges.

ASEAN-China relations have been correctly configured by a growing diplomatic, trade, investment, and maritime cooperation in a globalized world. The commitments made and mutual benefits that have been derived underscore the political and security environment that has evolved favorable to maintaining friendly interactions. Without this positive development, constructive developments in the political and security fields would be difficult to achieve. In return, dialogues and agreements in these areas will further boost economic cooperation and integration to higher scales.

Reports show growing trade relations between both sides: China has been ASEAN’s largest trading partner since 2009 while its imports from the regional group rose by 13.2 percent. Balance of trade was in favor of ASEAN in 2011 with exports exceeding imports by US\$11bn. At the same time, ASEAN is now China’s largest regional trading partner, rising from fourth place in 2011. Multilateral cooperation, upgraded by the signing of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) in 2012, is complemented by positive developments in bilateral relations in various fields. The ACFTA is considered as the world’s largest FTA based on a population of 1.8 billion.

Formalizing and institutionalizing the relations through agreements, treaties, and regional structures signify positive intentions and goodwill on the part of ASEAN member-countries and China to honor

principles, commitments, and objectives to promote and increase cooperation and partnership and, later, an ASEAN-China community extending to East Asia and the whole of Asia.

On this note, ASEAN paved the way in moving forward with the signing of its Charter in 2008 which is considered a quantum leap from consensus-building to binding agreements. Earlier following more than 10 years of dialogues and preliminary agreements or declarations on economic cooperation, dispute resolution, and non-traditional security issues, both ASEAN and China forged in 2003 the Joint Declaration of Strategic Partnership – a landmark instrument that set the roadmap for long-term cooperation and partnership. Corollary to this, it is important to note Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's call last August 2 in asking ASEAN countries to join hands with China to deepen "10 years of strategic partnership" through the "Asia Way" and "ASEAN Way." Along this paradigm, mechanisms have been put in place for high-level exchanges including, aside from summits, 12 ministerial-level cooperation mechanisms.

Likewise, it is interesting to recall a report released in 2006 by the ASEAN-China Eminent Persons Group (EPG) composed of 11 former statesmen from both sides stating that the establishment of a strategic partnership for peace and prosperity laid the foundation for the long-term ASEAN-China dialogue and partnership. Insofar as the political and security relationship is concerned, the EPG recommended that ASEAN and China focus on confidence-building measures to create an environment conducive to engagement and cooperation. Cooperation covers transnational issues including maritime security, illegal trafficking, terrorism, transnational crimes and disaster relief and management. On security, the EPG report said ASEAN and China have entered into cooperative mechanisms against drug trafficking, trafficking of people, illegal immigration, piracies, terrorism, arms smuggling, money laundering, and intertional economic crimes.

However, for the ASEAN-China strategic partnership to gain momentum and ensure its continuity, there are greater challenges that must be addressed.

First of all, progress in ASEAN-China relations would be more meaningful, durable and become a stabilizing factor economically and politically if improvements in cooperation, partnership, and other exchanges lead to the furtherance of people's human development in both areas and help bridge development disparities in the larger region. The state-to-state relations underlying the strategic partnership should essentially be a strategic response to the broader interests of the peoples in the region. Within ASEAN, income disparities were large when the association began in 1967 with five starting members (ASEAN-5), where the average income of the richest member, Singapore, was more than 11 times that of the poorest member; it was 14 times by 2010, but in that year Indonesia had overtaken the Philippines as the poorest country. Comparing between the first six members (ASEAN-5 plus Brunei) and the last four (CMLV), the absolute income gap between the two groups continuously widened since 1970. Wide gaps also exist in infrastructures particularly as regards access to telecommunications and the internet.

Within some if not all ASEAN countries – and I am referring to the Philippines in particular - income disparities and uneven development make social and political stability more pressing to the extent that any uncertainties arising from this situation will have an impact on the region as a whole. The greater the inter-connectivity in terms of trade and other economic arrangements the greater is the vulnerability to adverse effects arising from domestic or national uncertainties whether political or economic. In the final analysis, domestic or national stabilities founded on solid economic foundations help ensure the

continuity and durability of regional and inter-regional cooperation. The partnership should always be informed by the lessons of the European community and similar other regional efforts.

Therefore, it is imperative for ASEAN-China relations to be able to address these challenges through more complementary economic relations, infrastructure and institutional linkages, and people-to-people contacts toward narrowing the gaps in income and development. Multilateral, regional, and bilateral partnerships are meaningless unless these directly benefit the populations and, hence, develop a visible presence as vehicles of human development in the hearts and minds of the peoples. When peoples across countries embrace the principles of ASEAN-China cooperation and are able to collectively enjoy the positive impact of partnership in the economic, social, and cultural fields then that can shape the definitive strategic roadmap of this cooperation. And, if ASEAN-China is to become an effective engine of economic growth for Asia and become one community it must help narrow the economic gap.

Moreover, existing agreements and other mechanisms that make ASEAN-China relations rules-based and in accordance with international law – as agreed upon – should be allowed to mature in terms of having stronger political commitment by the respective governments. Actual international relations however reveal numerous situations where international laws and rules are adhered to in principle but their implementation is subject to how these are interpreted by sovereign states especially when sovereignty, territorial integrity, or jurisdiction issues are involved. In such instances, should adherence to law be observed while at the same time maintaining pragmatism and flexibility with confidence-building measures conducive to solving sensitive issues in the future? Dispute settlements can be guided by strict compliance to peaceful measures which all countries in ASEAN as well as China uphold in numerous declarations aware that going outside the bounds of this agreed-upon approach would undermine cordial and friendly relations with some destabilizing consequences.

A member of the ASEAN-China Eminent Persons Group and former secretary general of ASEAN, Ambassador Rodolfo C. Severino, proffers this advice: “What can be done in the meantime is what precisely ASEAN and China have been trying to do – exercising self-restraint, refraining from occupying any more territory, avoiding any acts that could shake the stability of the area, build mutual confidence, and cooperate in dealing with matters that call for cooperation and yield common benefits to the cooperating parties.”

While economic cooperation is the platform that binds ASEAN countries and China, U.S.-China relations continue to be a centerpiece in broader economic relations – as well as security matters – in the region and the whole of Asia. How China and the U.S. play their roles in their respective capacities as big economies with differing global influences have an effect on ASEAN-China relations given that a few ASEAN countries maintain strong albeit historical (colonial or neocolonial), economic, and security ties with the U.S. International peace is the overarching goal of China to be able to ensure its own economic sustainability as well as cooperation and partnership in Southeast Asia and the broader Asia. Accordingly, China agrees with the U.S. insofar as freedom of navigation in the high seas particularly in South China Sea – a major passageway of global trade – is concerned as well as peaceful settlement of disputes. However, American geopolitics in Asia is defined by its current “pivot” or “rebalancing” strategy in Asia with its more than a century of presence remaining founded on defense alliances and partnerships that is consistent with its century-long status as the Pacific power. How current U.S.-China cooperation can be sustained is now increasingly challenged, on the one hand, by China’s goal to strengthen its maritime system and by its core “New Strategic Concept” with the “Four Nos” (*ti bu*) – no hegemonism, no power politics, no alliances, and no arms races and, on the other, by America’s

increasingly military assertiveness in this part of the world that, in varying degrees, involve some ASEAN countries.

Indeed, ASEAN-China economic cooperation is pressing ahead with expressed hopes of deepening it toward an economically-integrated community. But it is navigating on turbulent seas and complexities not the least of which obviously are territorial disputes and geopolitical complexities. When state-to-state relations are bogged down with thorny issues and where consensus, compromise, or resolutions are difficult to build despite protracted, long-drawn dialogues and negotiations, the soft diplomacy of state-to-people or people-to-people dialogues and partnerships should be allowed to play. The last 50 years of international diplomacy and globalization of relations from trade to security has been influenced by this track – with cross-border non-state players (NGOs if you will) in many instances often leading the way in the quest for peace, fair trade, environment, climate change, rights and human security, health, women and child issues, among many other global issues.

In many respects, people-to-people diplomacy has proven to be the conscience and catalyst of change of international relations. In these areas, international treaties and conventions have been forged reflective of the voices and modern perspectives generated by people-to-people diplomacy and peaceful intervention. It is interesting to know that China is building on this track through its international exchanges with ASEAN countries involving NGOs, academic scholars, and think tank organizations and networks. This track should be able to move forward by strengthening intra-ASEAN NGO/academic/think tank linkages parallel to – and complementing - the efforts made by China while such people-to-people and state-to-people contacts in the key areas of culture, history, political and security relations, and economy between China and ASEAN continue to grow.

On this note, let me conclude that the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG) which I represent will do its share in increasing state-to-people and people-to-people contacts and is ready to work out mechanisms that would include hosting a conference on peace and development in the future. *CenPEG.org*