



RCAS Commentary

ASEAN-China Summit in Laos: Focusing on Cooperation Amid Global Challenges

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October 16, 2024

About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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ASEAN-China Summit in Laos: Focusing on Cooperation Amid Global Challenges

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The 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits and Related Summits were held in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, from 9 to 11 October. At the sidelines of the 27th ASEAN-China Summit, China and the ASEAN member states jointly issued the Joint Statement on the Substantial Conclusion of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) 3.0 Upgrade Negotiations, a landmark achievement for trade and investment cooperation between China and ASEAN.



▲(L-R) Myanmar's Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs Aung Kyaw Moe, Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, Chinese Premier Li Qiang, Laos' Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone, Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Manet, Indonesian Vice President Ma'ruf Amin and Prime Minister of Timor-Leste Xanana Gusmao stand for a group photo during the 27th ASEAN-China Summit at the National Convention Centre in Vientiane, Laos, 10 October 2024. (Athit Perawongmetha/Reuters).

South China Sea issue vs cooperation and development

However, some participants brought up the South China Sea (SCS) disputes, which shifted attention away from the primary focus on peace and development at the ASEAN Summits. During the meeting with Southeast Asian leaders on 11 October, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken criticised China's increasingly dangerous and

unlawful activities in the SCS for injuring people and harming vessels from ASEAN nations.

The day before that, Philippine President Marcos Jr, the closest ally of the US, also raised the issue in the meeting with Chinese Premier Li Qiang, arguing that China cannot pretend that all is well on the economic front when there are tensions on the political front.

While the US and the Philippines sought to highlight the South China Sea disputes as part of the “China threat”, most ASEAN leaders chose to steer clear of intense discussions on this issue during the summit.

For a long time, the ASEAN summits have been themed on cooperation and development, focusing on economic development and regional integration rather than highlighting and provoking geostrategic confrontation.

For instance, this year’s summit theme, “ASEAN: Enhancing Connectivity and Resilience”, underscores the leaders’ commitment to improving cross-border connectivity and strengthening the region’s industrial resilience, contributing to long-term prosperity and stability.

As Thongloun Sisoulith, president of Laos and the rotating chair of ASEAN, said in his opening address in Vientiane, ASEAN should continue to uphold its common cause of peace, stability and sustainable development, and commitment to multilateralism based on equality and mutual benefit. He said ASEAN countries should further strengthen cooperation grounded in the principles of “the ASEAN Way” to enhance ASEAN unity, solidarity and centrality.

Increasing connectivity amid China-US rivalry

Against the backdrop of the restructuring of the global supply chain and industrial chain since the China-US trade war, ASEAN countries are committed to deepening cooperation on the industrial chain with China to maintain sustained economic growth.

Moreover, ASEAN countries are eager to strengthen cooperation with China on the digital economy, green economy and artificial intelligence (AI) to promote sustainable development amid a new round of scientific and technological revolution led by AI.

Prior to this, China and ASEAN have made significant progress in physical connectivity in the past three years, laying a solid foundation for the rapid development of regional economic integration. As Chinese Premier Li said in his speech at the summit, China and ASEAN should build a multidimensional connective network to pave the way for Asia's future development.

With the opening of the China-Laos Railway and its connection with the China-Thailand Railway, and the feasibility study of the China-Vietnam Railway, the cross-border connectivity between China and ASEAN will be greatly accelerated in the future, thus adding strong engines to ASEAN's economic growth.

Since the US proposed the "Indo-Pacific strategy" in 2017, Southeast Asian nations have faced rising pressures to take sides between China and the US. On the one hand, the US announced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) to compete for influence with China in the Southeast Asian markets, on the other hand, it destabilised the SCS by supporting some claimants' provocative actions against China in the disputed waters.

Vigilant about efforts disrupting regional peace and stability

Such actions not only weaken ASEAN's centrality in maintaining peace and development in the region, but also generate differences among ASEAN member states, thereby increasing uncertainty about the future development of ASEAN.

In recent years, only the Philippines has been notably active in raising issues in the SCS since Marcos Jr took office two years ago, while other claimant states have remained relatively quiet. Although Marcos sought to form a "united front" against China with Vietnam and Malaysia regarding the South China Sea, he did not secure their support.

Conversely, all the newly elected leaders of Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia visited China and vowed to upgrade bilateral ties. For most ASEAN member states, cooperation takes precedence over competition when navigating great power rivalries in the region.

Notably, just before the summit, Indonesia's Jakarta Post published an editorial titled "No to Asia's NATO", criticising the "Asian version of NATO" proposed by Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and cautioning against introducing this concept during the ASEAN Summit. This highlights that ASEAN states are keeping a close eye on any attempts to disrupt peace and stability in the region.

Urgent issues to tackle

In fact, ASEAN's top priority is far from the SCS dispute. More pressing issues, such as the Myanmar crisis and telecommunication scams, require urgent and appropriate solutions.

Since the military coup in 2021, ASEAN has been striving to promote peace, stability and unity in Myanmar through diplomatic mediation. China has backed ASEAN's efforts to take the lead in addressing the Myanmar crisis.

However, escalating tensions between the military and anti-government forces, including the People's Defence Forces and certain ethnic armed groups supported by the US, have made ASEAN's peaceful diplomatic mediation increasingly challenging.

Telecommunication scams in several Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, have become a "cancer", undermining social stability and hindering people-to-people exchanges among these nations.

During the summit, Thailand and Laos pledged to work together to combat cross-border telecommunication scams and tackle the major issues affecting both countries. Previously, China collaborated with the Philippines, Myanmar and Laos to repatriate criminals involved in these scams. It is clear that China and ASEAN states have agreed to collaborate on addressing telecommunications scams, which will help maintain social stability within ASEAN countries and enhance people-to-people exchanges with China.

This article was first published at Think China, Singapore, October 16, 2024, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/asean-china-summit-laos-focusing-cooperation-amid-global-challenges>.

About Author



Nian Peng is the Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong. He holds a Ph.D in Government and International Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. His main research interests are in the areas of China-Southeast/South Asia relations, Belt and Road Initiative(BRI) and maritime security of the Indo-Pacific. He authored/edited four books-*Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Springer Nature, 2022), *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Springer Nature, 2021), *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic* (Springer Nature, 2021), *International Pressures, Strategic Preference, and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988* (Springer Nature, 2020). His refereed articles have been notably published in *Ocean Development and International Law*, *Pacific Focus*, *Asian Affairs*, etc. He also contributes his perspectives to many think tanks and various local and international media outlets such as Asia Centre in France, *East Asian Forum* in Australia, *The Diplomat* in the USA, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *Global Times*, *CGTN*, *World Affairs* in China. Email: hkrcas@163.com.