



RCAS Commentary

Connectivity Overdrive: How Hard and Soft Links Boost China-ASEAN Cooperation

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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 leaders recently went to China one after the other. On 8 November, Indonesia's new president, Prabowo Subianto, visited China on one of his first overseas visits as president. From 4 to 7 November, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim visited China, his third since taking office. In addition, leaders of the Mekong countries-Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam-attended the 8th Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) summit held from 4 to 7 November in Kunming, Yunnan.



▲ The high-speed rail (HSR) project connecting Indonesia's two major cities Jakarta and Bandung, a joint venture between Indonesian and Chinese state-owned companies. (KCIC).

These recent high-level interactions not only reflect closer China-ASEAN relations since the pandemic, but also underscore the urgent need for regional cooperation among ASEAN countries.

The need for closer economic cooperation

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During his talks with Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang, Anwar pledged that Malaysia, as the rotating chair of ASEAN next year, would strive to strengthen regional cooperation. Li replied that China would be willing to work with Malaysia to promote regional economic integration.

It is clear that accelerating regional cooperation and promoting economic integration are goals that enjoy strong consensus between China and ASEAN countries.

Similarly, the just-concluded GMS leaders' meeting stressed the need to promote sustainable development and economic integration in the region. In introducing Prabowo's visit to China, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that China stands ready to work with Indonesia to boost regional and global development and prosperity.

In the Mekong Region, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) initiated by China has achieved impressive efforts in deepening regional connectivity, creating the Lancang-Mekong Economic Development Belt (LMEDB), building the Lancang-Mekong sub-regional community with a shared future, as well as supporting the ASEAN Community building and regional integration process.

China boosting connectivity with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam

The China-Laos railway, which is the first cross-border railway between China and the Mekong region, has in the first ten months of the year, carried over 16 million passengers and transported over 16 million tons of goods. In July, the Thai-Laos railway officially began its trial operation. As the first phase construction of the Thai-China railway is also being accelerated under the Paetongtarn administration, the China-Laos-Thai railway will function in the future.

Additionally, the construction of the China-Vietnam railway is expected to commence in 2025, and the preliminary work for the China-Cambodia railway is being expedited.

It is worth noting that the stagnant China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) since Myanmar's military coup in 2021 has gained new momentum to be revived. During the meeting between Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang and Chairman of the Myanmar State Administration Council (SAC) Min Aung Hlaing on 7 November, Li expressed China's willingness to work with Myanmar to "steadily advance the construction of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor under the framework of high-quality Belt and Road cooperation".

Min Aung Hlaing outlined Myanmar's ongoing strategies for the economic corridor under CMEC, including the Muse-Mandalay-Kyaukpyu railway road project. This project, a key component of the previously cancelled China-Myanmar cross-border railway, will commence development in feasible areas. So, it can be said that the China-Myanmar cross-border railway will be resumed, thus providing a solid foundation for CMEC.

Infrastructure in maritime Southeast Asia

In maritime Southeast Asia, physical connectivity has also been greatly promoted with Chinese technology. The East Coast Rail project in Malaysia is proceeding smoothly, with 72.93% of the total work completed by September. Flagship projects such as the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) and the China-Malaysia Qinzhou Industrial Park under the model of "Two Countries, Twin Parks", are being steadily advanced.

The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway in Indonesia, which was officially inaugurated over a year ago, has transported over 5.79 million passengers. Both China

and Indonesia speak highly of the important contributions of the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Railway to local economic and social development and pledged to jointly ensure its high-quality operation during Prabowo's China tour. Both sides will also work together to promote the Regional Comprehensive Economic Corridor and "Two Countries, Twin Parks".

On 11 November, 25 memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and agreements were announced during the bilateral meeting between Chinese Vice-Premier Ding Xuexiang and Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong, in which physical connectivity topped the list. These mainly include the projects under the China-Singapore (Chongqing) Demonstration Initiative on Strategic Connectivity and the Singapore-Shandong Green and Digital Shipping Corridor (GDSC).

Paying attention to 'soft connectivity'

While the "hard connectivity" of infrastructure is being strengthened, China is also increasingly paying attention to the construction of the "soft connectivity" of standards and rules.

Last month, Chinese and ASEAN leaders jointly announced the substantial conclusion of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) 3.0 Upgrade negotiations. Against the backdrop of high concerns over rising anti-multilateralism and trade protectionism arising after Donald Trump regains power in the US, the FTA provides an institutional assurance for China and ASEAN to jointly build a super-large common market.

This would not only further deepen the trade and investment cooperation between China and ASEAN and thus the delivery of greater benefits from infrastructure connectivity, but also bolster the willingness and confidence of both sides to advance

regional cooperation and reduce the interference caused by the resurgence of US trade protectionism.

Next, it is necessary for China and ASEAN to continue their efforts in the fields of industrial cooperation and people-to-people exchanges to strengthen the economic integration through industrial chain reconstruction and shape a consensus of regional cooperation through convenient personnel exchanges.

Looking to the future

Last month, at the 27th China-ASEAN Summit, China expressed its intention to expand cooperation in emerging industries with ASEAN to add momentum to Asian development in the future. This month, at the GMS Summit, China stressed the importance of innovation-driven development with Mekong River countries to foster new growth drivers for the region.

In the future, China and ASEAN can develop cross-border industrial chains in emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, digital economy, green development and new energy vehicles, and scale up regional emerging industries to maximise the benefits brought by regional cooperation.

Currently, China has implemented a convenient visa-free entry policy with Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and other ASEAN countries. At the GMS summit, China announced the “Lancang-Mekong visas” granting five-year multiple-entry visas to qualified business people from the Mekong states. This not only provides greater convenience for personnel exchanges between China and ASEAN countries, but also heightens the strong civilian support for regional cooperation.

To conclude, with the synergistic effects of “hard connectivity” and “soft connectivity” working together, China-ASEAN regional cooperation will yield even greater gains in the future.

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About Author



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