

The People's Republic of China - ASEAN Political and Security Relationship (2003 - 2021): A Review and Prospects

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Abstract:

This article summarizes and analyzes the major achievements of ASEAN - the People's Republic of China (PRC) political and security collaboration in two major phases: from the establishment of Strategic Partnership to the 2016 ASEAN-China Summit on political and security affairs (2003 - 2015) and from that Communique to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership achievement (2016 - 2021). A qualitative design is adopted, and therefore, a wealth of information from the official ASEAN website and previous literature was collected in tune with an evolutionary approach to analyze the achievements and prospects of this relationship. From 2003 to 2015, ASEAN and the PRC took initial steps and gained mutual understanding in dealing with territorial disputes and emergent problems of non-traditional security affairs. As soon as the 2016 Joint Communique on deeper engagement of political and security affairs while seeing the involvement of the US and other major powers, ASEAN and PRC appeared intimate and honest to reinforce the bilateral relationships and restrain territorial disputes and other discords on this issue. The main argument of this research project is that ASEAN and PRC have interests in traditional and non-traditional regional political and security affairs and strive to achieve a peace-based dialogue mechanism with China to deal with regional affairs effectively. Contrastingly, Beijing did not affirmatively resolve existing problems, which are not directly affiliated with PRC strategies abroad. Beijing was unready to make a major

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concession in key issues, including South China Sea disputes. When giving an insightful perspective, I argue that ASEAN would maintain its extant forums to critically converse with the PRC in potential dispute settlement and achieve a higher level of Beijing's economic connectivity. Meanwhile, an effort in Beijing to separate ASEAN monolithic and the strategic presence of other partners would be challenged, which requires Beijing to diminish its hostility and imprudence in its relationship with ASEAN.

Keywords: *ASEAN, People's Republic of China, Strategic Partnership, Southeast Asia, Political and Security Cooperation*

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Introduction

In recent years, the engagement of the PRC in Southeast Asia has appealed to garner academic attention. The expansionist goal of China in the South China Sea became increasing in some discussions over Chinese economic interests in this region while a shortage of in-depth reviews on Beijing's underlying causes and effects on the political and security sphere of ASEAN and ASEAN members' reactions persisted. Since shaping a well-established history across centuries, Southeast Asia has been pivotal in China's policy, and this country has always aimed to monopolize this bountiful region (Allen 1997). I do not mean referring to that long-standing past. Yet, the conclusion of the war in Indochina gradually caught Beijing's attention and accelerated its deeper involvement in Southeast Asia. Evidently, from an ill will, PRC cables with ASEAN members and achieves rapprochement. Subsequently, PRC and ASEAN gained a Strategic Partnership in 2003 (Ian 2011, 157-179; Mikael 2010, 35-69), which alleged to muster strength for a peaceful and wealthy Southeast Asia.

The ASEAN-PRC relationship has a well-trodden background of scholarship. Previous authors poured their ink into this cozy relationship in addressing a target of economic thriving and pressing traditional and non-traditional security affairs in Southeast Asia (Nguyen et al. 2021, 2661-2680). Similarly, ASEAN viewed ASEAN way as a panacea to rescue political fatigue and remain political neutrality despite flagrant territorial violations from China. Besides, I found some scattered articles articulating Chinese manners and reactions to the South China Sea disputes when the PRC does not mean a loss of the ASEAN market and attempts to embody "China's peaceful rise". Hence, that situation requires Beijing to escalate a conflict in the South China Sea to what extent of territorial assumption. It also seeks a way to debate this with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei in its

confidential talks. As a result, the realization of a Certificate of Conformance (COC) is hard to achieve (Anuson 2015, 9-14).

Some specialists believed the ASEAN peace negotiations would eliminate misunderstanding and urged Beijing to ratify the draft of COC (Taylor 2011, 292-319). However, that implementation became infeasible, because Beijing is pending for a favorable condition of Southeast Asia's political landscape in a prudent way (Anh 2017, 16). This procrastination accordingly raised a nagging concern over China's overriding presence (Nehginpao 2018, 433-448). In contrast, other experts optimistically overlooked this relationship. They forcefully argued that ASEAN would play a moderator role in building a healthy political environment, and discord can be dodged from partners' sides thanks to this solution (Pham 2008, 122-129).

Besides, some articles evaluated the efficiency of non-traditional security talks between the PRC and ASEAN. The ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) Forum proved that these meetings would strengthen the formidable capacity of this bilateral relationship when estimating the political situation and reaching a consensus in translating their reciprocal wishes into reality, such as a proclamation to keep smugglers and contraband at bay (Wibisono 2017, 39-54). Some other articles were dedicated to major powers' involvement, such as the US, India, and Japan relations, which would thwart a plan of Chinese suzerainty in Southeast Asia and limit any recalcitrant actions of China to maintain its hard irredentism (Zhao 2013, 27-73). ASEAN members are probably inclined toward a mutual wish to bind their strategic partners to ASEAN codes and limit any potential risks that would undermine regional political stability (Termsak 2014, 57-73).

Broadly speaking, a growing literature on ASEAN-PRC relationships shows that the heart of ASEAN's policy lies in gaining hegemony to minimize any territorial dispute with China. While leaving those problems unresolved, China still patched up with ASEAN members to expand its presence in Southeast Asia through economic collaboration. Sporadic articles approached either the Chinese or ASEAN sides. Nevertheless, it lacks a general illustration of Sino-ASEAN political and security collaboration. How did it progress? How were ASEAN and China cognizant of strategies and intentions with their specific actions taken? What prospects could we make for this relationship?

Theoretical framework

When examining the Sino-ASEAN bilateral relationship, I adapted this project to an approach of Liberalism. Theoretically, it gave recognition to another instrument, which would approach current affairs through peace negotiations and catch leaders' attention

with foreseeable economic benefits and a free market in favor of collaboration and peace goodwill. In light of the increasing chance of mutual understanding and a deeper connection, there is a growing involvement of non-governmental organizations and regional forums to voice nations' concerns over worrying issues of traditional security and non-traditional security (Shirayev 2014, 77-78). To develop this scientific theory, the majority of states affiliated with this approach as soon as the 9/11 terrorism occurred and the emergence of great powers, such as China, South Korea, and Japan in Asia - the Pacific Ocean with the aim of achieving regional political stability.

When utilizing Liberalism to interpret this circumstance, I note that the Sino-Vietnamese détente in 1991 marked the first stage of Beijing's intervention into Southeast Asia. Subsequently, the Chinese participation in the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur and gaining the position of a full dialogue member in 1996 (The Washington Post 1991; ASEAN-China Center 2020) illustrated that Beijing integrated into a trajectory of regionalism and heightened the importance of ASEAN in managing economic links with ASEAN members and guaranteeing Beijing's interests in Southeast Asia. As such, that policy would be beneficial to Beijing's Sea strategies and ambition. On the other hand, ASEAN's acceptance of the participation of Beijing in ASEAN also has an implication for China's role in free navigation and economic exchanges, which ASEAN needs to minimize the risk of impoverishment and underdevelopment.

Parallely, while dominated by Liberalism in foreign policy, both ASEAN and the PRC also concentrated on unsolved problems of territorial disputes, but both sides acceded to a peace approach. John Herz supposed that a state generates safe security and would encourage other states to exemplify it for their security building (John, 1950, pp. 157-180). Thereby, the reconfiguration of ASEAN foreign policy, which leans toward a collective effort with external partners, pushes political and security affairs ahead and reinforces mutual understanding between China and ASEAN in this problem. As such, it is paramount that those states obligatorily embrace their diverse viewpoints and live aloof from impetuous conflicts. Daniel Deudney and G. John Eikenberry (2000) fueled their belief in the validation of agreed international law and agreements in terms of uniform implementation while nurturing seeds of free trade, capitalism, human rights, democracy, and social order (Jeffrey 2018). Beijing's recent policy sounds increasingly democratic, responsible, and reserved despite a series of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, remaining acceptable to settle regional affairs. Moreover, an intense engagement of the US, Russia, South Korea, and Japan is probably a cause for Beijing to be challenged in its capacity of territorial violation on land and sea. Beijing would revert to its commitment to ASEAN in dealing with potential discord by taking further steps toward bilateral collaboration and mutual understanding. Otherwise, a ruptured relationship would be highly likely to happen.

Methodology

This paper adopted a qualitative research design and a historical perspective to address given research questions. Pieces of evidence are chronologically arranged to see the progress of this relationship. This method helps perceive how ASEAN and the PRC took their actions and achieved their decisions in their political and security collaboration. These events are deeply analyzed by the given theoretical framework aligned with personal assessments of achievements and setbacks of this relationship. As such, I generalized the key steps of the relationship and obtained insightful implications for this future relationship.

Source materials come from a handful of data retrieved from extant literature, including official websites and articles. These materials were gleaned entirely from the ASEAN Homepage website and the official websites of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Moreover, I also collected secondary sources, which examined the political maneuvering of the ASEAN-China relationship in previous articles, books, and derivative documents processed by thematic analysis on the grounds of Liberalism.

Initial steps to set up mutual respect in political and security cooperation (2003 - 2015)

Historically, Chinese intervention in Southeast Asia left a psychological trauma for ASEAN members. A critical point of territorial dispute lies in the South China Sea, which was a locale of Chinese occupation in 1956, and the Paracel Archipelago was entirely and illegally annexed by the PRC in 1974 (Lo 1989, 27-29). After the normalization process between China and ASEAN, the South China Sea has appeared as a heated topic of scholarship and political arguments. The 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) framed an initial legal framework to engender a joint ASEAN - the PRC notion on security cooperation. This important paper obliged the PRC and ASEAN to strictly conform to the United Nations Charter's principles and explore new ways of mutual trust-building, trust, and confidence, undertaking to resolve their territorial disputes through peaceful means (ASEAN, 2002). DOC glued the PRC with ASEAN principles, and this was a noteworthy achievement.

As soon as achieving an upgrade in 2003, ASEAN fostered an organic relationship and appeared highly responsible for maritime affairs and strong economic connectivity. ASEAN and the PRC reached a Joint Communiqué and conducted the DOC straightforwardly. In light of this agreement, the ASEAN-PRC Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) was open for the purpose of dealing with South China Sea disputes via bilateral dialogues (ASEAN 2012). The PRC's assertiveness to DOC in the ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Informal Meeting Joint Press Release on June 21, 2004, in Qingdao created self-assurance in containing

potential conflicts and reaching regional stability (ASEAN 2012). These consecutive events showed that the motivations and the substance of Chinese engagement in Southeast Asia were conditioned by the importance of ASEAN to China's expansionist goal. The existence of South China Sea disputes required a clear-cut statement from Beijing once the authority attempted to perform its strategic presence in Southeast Asia. When the US had not paid great attention to Southeast Asia and adopted a complete policy on Asia – the Pacific Ocean, these events proved that Beijing became sensible to undertake that China had a huge advantage in Southeast Asia and a sense of readiness in any treaty with ASEAN.

Meanwhile, ASEAN and the PRC mentioned non-traditional security for the first time in 2004. During the 8th ASEAN + PRC Summit in Vientiane in late 2004, "Deepening ASEAN-PRC Strategic Partnership" was themed, and this forum targeted a broad scope of security affairs as ratified on November 4, 2002, in Phnom Penh, and the ASEAN-PRC Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), including a healthy flow of imported goods, anti-smuggler and contraband (ASEAN 2012). It was also a nagging concern of Beijing regarding multinational exchange across borders and it had to guarantee Beijing's economic interests in moderating goods flows and maintaining an organic market for Chinese exported commodities (Mely 2016). Both ASEAN and the PRC highlighted the free-market significance and ASEAN's role in this economic connectivity pertaining to political and security issues. Thus, the two sides promised to pay much heed to maritime security, illegal trafficking, terrorism, transnational crimes, disaster relief, and statecraft (ASEAN 2005, 9). Beijing has a sense of alacrity to make a collective effort with ASEAN members in reinforcing a legal framework of non-traditional security, which holds powerful significance to the Chinese international economy in Southeast Asia. Besides, the presence of China in those problems assisted ASEAN in perceiving newly emerged non-traditional security risks and investigating a mutual understanding by a dialogue mechanism.

Besides, a noteworthy "Join Hands to Create a Better Future for the People's Republic of China-ASEAN" published in 2006 fully operated the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. This paper also established strategic partnership and prosperity with ASEAN. It reinforced a large network of ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+10, which targeted a collegial environment of mutual collaboration (Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in San Francisco, 2006). Beijing laid an emphasis on mutual trust and benefited from this bilateral dialogue with ASEAN for fear that the US would expand its presence in the Asia-Pacific Ocean. Paying precocious attention to the intervention of major powers in Southeast Asia, Beijing unduly implemented an all-out militarization plan. It ignited a storm of conflicts in the South China Sea, and those plans were genuinely implemented in the subsequent years. In light of China's unpredictable foreign policy, ASEAN strived to sustain a healthy relationship and still operated in ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+10 in an

enthusiastic way (Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007). In particular, the ASEAN stance consistently asserted the Chinese factor in Southeast Asia's economic and political growth but also indicated that ASEAN implied a power-balance approach in building the Sino-ASEAN relationship.

In reality, Beijing still caused a mixed reaction in the South China Sea's flashpoints in 2009, 2011, and 2014 (VnExpress 2011; The U.S. Embassy in Hanoi 2014). These incursions undermined regional peace. Yet, ASEAN's claimant states (Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, and Malaysia) did not take any defensive campaigns. These claimant members, in contrast, merely spewed out fierce opposition to these aggressive actions and recollected DOC in their reciprocal dialogues. In a subtle manner, the 12th ASEAN-PRC Summit also scarcely mentioned this conflict. Beijing fudged mentioning this issue in ASEAN-China dialogues while seeking to meet ASEAN claimant members in person to discuss this problem. ASEAN claimant members declined this solution and are overly concerned about DOC and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which Beijing devoted to conducting. ASEAN claimant members continued to reiterate a never-changing viewpoint on the ASEAN way. They coerced Beijing into having to strictly conform to regional peace, stability, and freedom of navigation and not debating this problem in a divergent way with Beijing (ASEAN 2011). As such, ASEAN members thoroughly discussed this issue at the 17th ASEAN - PRC Summit in 2014 by referring to the Plan of Action (2011-2015) (ASEAN 2014). The conflict also became a central topic at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 2014 (ASEAN 2014). On the occasion of the 18th ASEAN - PRC Summit in 2015, ASEAN and China recognized their strategy to diminish the possibility of conflicts and misunderstanding. It afforded to build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road by the implementation of the 2+7 cooperation framework, opening a wide window for economic ties (The State Council of People Republic of China, 2015). Meanwhile, ASEAN and the PRC still leveraged the ASEAN-China Summit, ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference with PRC (PMC+1), ASEAN-PRC Senior Officials Consultations (SOC), the ASEAN-PRC Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC), and other forums (ASEAN 2015). While ASEAN consistently adopted an elastic political idea to deal with Beijing's aggression and transcended the diversity of members' opinions, Beijing seemed to be turning a deaf ear on mildly critical of ASEAN on China's territorial claims on South China Sea affairs, not internationalizing South China Sea disputes.

Broadly speaking, the first chapter of this relationship went on a steep road. While striving to voice a mutual concern over this issue, DOC is undoubtedly a success, a full lofty sentiment of this political and security relationship is mostly unachievable. The heart of this amity does not lie in political and security ties. Still, in the economy and free market, a dearth of strict management in behaving toward conflicts by a specific article, and an

elevated level of bind drove ASEAN and China into misunderstanding and skepticism. While ASEAN chose a peaceful way and dialogue to settle conflicts, Beijing's stances are erratic, and available UNCLOS and DOC do not always work. These commitments seem insufficient to give a pause to potential disputes and disagreements.

Deeper cooperation to preserve a healthy sphere of politics and security (2016-2021)

The swift change of the US foreign policy in 2016, which the US presented broadly in the Asia-Pacific Ocean, also altered the content of Chinese foreign policy toward ASEAN. Instead of raising hatred, Beijing became liable for what it sanctioned and committed to ASEAN. The Chairmen's Statement of the 19th ASEAN - People's Republic of China Summit strengthened a joint commitment to peace, stability, and prosperity. It unanimously recognized its commitment to ASEAN+3, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ASEAN, 2016). Seriously, ASEAN lobbied Beijing to rivet political and security collaboration as a central aspect of this amity. For fear that being isolated in Southeast Asia would become a major obstacle to an expansionist goal in Southeast Asia, Beijing attempted to make the great leap forward in upgrading the strategic partnership with ASEAN in the context that Washington provided political support and military aid to ASEAN. The uneasiness of Donald Trump's administration urged Beijing to balance against an adamant policy of Donald Trump on territorial affairs in Southeast Asia as well as the magnanimity of Washington to back Southeast Asian countries in crippling Beijing's effort in territorial expansion in the South China Sea. The voices of other ASEAN partners, such as South Korea, Japan, India, and the U.S., played a role in downplaying supreme economic importance, which Beijing has some kinds of advantages in Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, the withdrawal of the U.S. from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017 showed a tacit approach in Southeast Asia, which expressed discord on China's foreign policy in Southeast Asia. In response to this action, ASEAN adopted a balance of power and maintained political neutrality by renewing a memorandum with Beijing. Both sides sanctioned this at the Fifth AMMTC (ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime) + PRC Consultation on September 21, 2017, in Manila (ASEAN 2017). As a subtle response to Beijing's foreign policy, ASEAN, still in collaboration with China, preserved its strategic interest in monitoring traditional security and non-traditional security challenges because the political stability of Southeast Asia has a tonic effect on sustaining economic exchange activities between ASEAN and China in Southeast Asia. Beijing also organized mechanisms of international law or offered in-depth training courses with drug enforcement officers from ASEAN countries. Entering 2018, the 4th ASEAN-PRC Coordination Meeting took place in Hanoi in 2018 adopted the Terms of Reference of ASEAN and PRC Cooperative

Operations in Response to Dangerous Drugs (ACCORD) (China Daily Online Newspaper 2018). Beijing seeks to intensify the demonstrations of border security, including smugglers, evil drugs, and illegal contraband. It also offers a thoughtful view of Beijing in political and security collaborations with Southeast Asia to secure its survival in this region. This aspect was also extended at the 21st ASEAN-PRC Summit to commemorate the 15th Anniversary of the ASEAN-PRC Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in 2018 (ASEAN 2018), which underscored a mutual trust and understanding between ASEAN and the PRC in defense, non-traditional security, and transnational threats.

Although the 2019 Sino-American Commercial War posed an economic challenge to ASEAN, ASEAN members still took an even-handed view to control Sino-American relationships in Southeast Asia. At the 22nd ASEAN - People's Republic of China Summit in 2019, ASEAN and Beijing translated "the Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-PRC Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2016 - 2020)" into reality to make protection for ASEAN states from transnational dangers and assume a full control on security border and region (ASEAN 2019). This agreement also resulted in reinforcing ADMM+ and utilized bilateral dialogue as a realpolitik. The success of ASEAN is that the organization kept a moderate voice and embroiled China in regional forums on security affairs. While geopolitical alignments have grown more complex, ASEAN kept up its relationships with Beijing and utilized bilateral mechanisms to stem the spread of conflicts and misunderstandings in regional security. It seems that Beijing set aside South China Sea disputes and has a limited capacity for assaults on account of the US presence and the efficiency of ASEAN's bilateral forums with other partners.

Bilateral talks between Beijing and ASEAN continued to happen for two years after the COVID-19 pandemic (The People's Republic of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Beijing and ASEAN broadened their horizons on how to address persistent security affairs in the context of global epidemic and achieving unanimous agreements in ASEAN +1, ASEAN +3 (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in the 23rd ASEAN - PRC Summit in 2020(ASEAN - China Center, 2020). Noticeably, ASEAN held China accountable for achieving progress in the COC and its legal framework (ASEAN, 2020) for fear that India, Japan, South Korea, and the US would forge an alliance to staunchly resist against Chinese expansion and militarization strategies in the South China Sea.

The closeness of this relationship is also illustrated in a couple of events on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of ASEAN- PRC relations. First, the Special Meeting of ASEAN-PRC Foreign Ministers was formally organized in Chongqing, China on June 7, 2021. In particular, besides critical talks on the COVID-19 situation, ASEAN and the PRC performed a discernible attitude toward a promotion of multilateralism targeted at the normalcy of

industrial supply chains. They reached a consensus on the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2025 and The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Markedly, ASEAN and Beijing concurred with a favorable environment of the COC negotiations and the increasingly powerful significance of DOC in tackling maritime affairs and maintaining peace, political stability, and concern over non-traditional security affairs (People's Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). In addition, the ASEAN - People's Republic of China Defense Ministers' informal meeting on June 15, 2021, continued to utilize the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as main forums to solve traditional and non-traditional security challenges (ASEAN Defence - Military Meeting, 2021). Beijing has to soften its position in Southeast Asia while still having a simmering dream to take territorial assumptions over the South China Sea and awaiting a favorable moment to ignite a conflict. As such, Beijing conceded to upgrade the ASEAN-PRC relationship to a level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (ASEAN Defence - Military Meeting, 2021), which Beijing nurtured its mutual trust and commitment to ASEAN while it saw its economic and political disadvantages and challenged other powers' capacity. As a consequence, ASEAN and PRC upgraded this relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2021 at the 24th ASEAN-China Summit in October 2021. This event highlighted a desperate need for transnational crime prevention as a critical aspect of non-traditional security affairs. It aimed at an effective implementation of the ASEAN-PRC Work Plan on Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues (2019 - 2023) (ASEAN, Chairman Statement of the 24th ASEAN-China Summit 2021). Not hurrying to take quick action, Beijing resolved in a well-meaning way to preserve its interest in terms of heavy pressure from the US and other states in the Southeast Asian environment.

Scenario

Over the course of this timeframe, ASEAN and Beijing made a collective effort to perform their mutual duty in dealing with regional traditional and non-traditional security affairs. ASEAN succeeded in taking a soft approach to Beijing and appealing for the PRC's involvement in some regional forums, including ADMM, ADMM+, EAS, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). The annual events of these high-level bilateral summits accepted an ASEAN broad viewpoint of peace, stability, cooperation, and development. They recalled Beijing on signed agreements and their serious implementation in settling conflicts in Southeast Asia. Not meaning to aggravate the peevish stance of Beijing, ASEAN proved its authentic approach to be responsive in a middle-of-the-road way. When building companionship with ASEAN, the PRC retained its economic connectivity and paid attention to the prospective Southeast Asian market. Nonetheless, Beijing also would never shelve a decision to assume its power in the South China Sea, which would

be beneficial to Chinese Sea Strategies and hugely bring economic and political advantages to the PRC. That is uneasy. Not only the stiff opposition of ASEAN claimant members but also the engagement of major powers, such as the US, Japan, South Korea, and India is posing a huge challenge to fulfill Beijing's ambition. As a result, even if it causes tensions in security affairs, Beijing has to abandon its goal to achieve its power in Southeast Asia in the quickest way. Instead, Beijing recurred its agreements with ASEAN to give an impulse to vital economic and political interests rather than losing them all. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership ostensibly opens up a bright vista, but it is too early to believe a smooth implementation of this Joint Communiqué.

Initially, Beijing would consider economic connectivity as a staple of ASEAN-China bilateral ties, because the PRC found it no challenging to associate with Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and maintain economic links with these overseas Chinese groups (Shihong 2021, 83-107). In spite of this strength, Beijing is likely to back ASEAN members and achieve tacit political and military consent with separate ASEAN members. In light of little choice in conducting an expansionist goal in Southeast Asia, Beijing would interfere with ASEAN's internal affairs more profoundly. It is not purely commercial but military and political alignments as well. This situation leads to the fact that ASEAN remains divided in the assertiveness of Chinese false and nonsense territorial claims in the South China Sea and other security affairs. Therefore, those forums of Sino-ASEAN bilateral talks are likely to be impotent, and it would be tough to gain a unanimous agreement of both claimant and non-claimant ASEAN members when confronting China. Some ASEAN members who share a mutual sea border with China probably heighten the deep significance of the ASEAN- PRC Summit, ADMM, ADMM+, EAS, and EAMF to undertake existing South China Sea security affairs seriously. Nevertheless, Beijing's assistance seems inadequate to guarantee ASEAN members' interests and stickily weave ASEAN with China's interests. The US backing is probably a challenge. Thus, ASEAN would not be completely dependent on China's economic well-being and still have other potential chances to diversify its international economic relations with other external partners. For instance, Vietnam achieved the highest upgrade with the US in 2023 to become a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This shows that the PRC has little choice for ASEAN members.

Existing misunderstanding between ASEAN and the PRC is also a setback to this bilateral relationship. The level of Chinese concession varies across issues, but Beijing would never make a major concession on matters vital to Chinese interests abroad. Currently, the PRC seems accommodating to diligently work with ASEAN in solving maritime disputes, non-traditional affairs, and political stability in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the sluggish action of the COC implementation while circumventing the DOC results in an inconsistency

of the PRC foreign policy with ASEAN. Although proclaiming a resolve to reduce tension in the South China Sea, the PRC still built its infrastructure or created a new map with sweeping territorial claims in the Spratly Archipelago (Chetra 2023). Beijing would sustain its plan to enlarge its military strategies in the South China Sea and build military confidence in this sea despite the US warning and other ASEAN proclamations on false PRC territorial claims. Besides, the PRC was unwilling to debate over pernicious effects of the Chinese dam in the Mekong River, which caused concerns of those downstream and propelled ASEAN members to vehemently criticize this strategy concerning their sovereignty and environmental sustainability (Suzanne 2022, 152-169). The PRC would maintain its resolve in conducting a minimal concession on these territorial and environmental affairs. However, in fact, Beijing still examined and accepted useful proposals from ASEAN once it saw prospects and huge advantages in this deal. Showing a collaborative manner to ASEAN is effortless in building the self-assurance of the PRC in Southeast Asia. However, carrying out signed agreements in an effective way as regulated would rest on what China benefits from and what Beijing concludes after observing other states in this region, the US, for example.

To stand in a desperately perilous position and confront the unpredictable Beijing reactions to political and security affairs, ASEAN has to strictly adhere to what it committed to Beijing and show favoritism to minimize the tension in this region. Nevertheless, a diversity of ASEAN opinions makes a joint effort difficult to achieve. ASEAN members would still have certainty about the existing multilateral forums and rivet their relationships with other external partners to impede Chinese suzerainty in the South China Sea. Obviously, strategic appearances of the US, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and India blasted Chinese plans. The US even endeavored to seek a negotiation with the PRC to reduce tensions in the South China Sea (Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA 2021). Although closely collaborating with all partners, ASEAN is likely not to hinge on any partner to confront Chinese fatigues in Southeast Asia, because favoritism would plunge ASEAN into a misunderstanding and lose the power-balance approach, that ASEAN is pursuing. Despite a divergence of perspective, ASEAN would continue to discuss and achieve a complete COC version and internationalize the regional problems. There is a formidable challenge to reach the COC Proclamation. Beijing's permanent plan to militarize the South China Sea procrastinated this conversation. This requires additional attempts to translate this idea into reality. Owing to the ever-changing PRC inner politics and economy but deeming Southeast Asia as a pivotal character of foreign policy (Richard, Angel, & C.R. 2000), the PRC would pull this region into political instability. ASEAN would utilize the ASEAN way, a foundation of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and its power-balance policy to moderate contradicting viewpoints and interests between the PRC and ASEAN and

between the PRC and other ASEAN partners not to galvanize any states into aggressive actions in Southeast Asia. The magnitude of ASEAN is that it needs peace and political stability to foster economic well-being and get rid of potential war and conflicts.

Conclusions

To sum up, even if they share cultural similarities and shared borders, the bilateral relationship between the PRC and ASEAN was under the heavy influence of 21st-century international relations. ASEAN plays a critical role in China's economic connectivity with Southeast Asia, and this region is also beneficial to PRC strategies in the South China Sea and China's border security. Meanwhile, ASEAN needs the presence of Beijing to attain regional economic thriving and serious implementation of codes in traditional security affairs and guarantee free navigation and territorial sacrosanct. Based on two major historical phases of this relationship, ASEAN and the PRC gained progress in starting to analyze regional political affairs, open new forums, such as ASEAN-PRC Summit, ADMM, ADMM+, EAS, and EAMF, and sign agreements. Besides, ASEAN and PRC also broadened a formal discussion over non-traditional political and security affairs.

Nevertheless, an enormous challenge originated from the involvement of great powers in Southeast Asia, which crippled the PRC's efforts to dominate its voice in the regional affairs of Southeast Asia. Despite a willingness to intervene in political and security affairs, Beijing was still extremely sensitive to ASEAN's claims on marine territories, took revenge on the territorial claims of ASEAN members, and triggered tough moves by ASEAN members to defend their land and sea. The 10-dash map released by Beijing made ASEAN members, who have shared sea borders with China, be filled with intense hatred and ruptured bilateral relations between ASEAN members and the PRC. However, ASEAN members, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, and Malaysia, did not make a bold move other than delicate words to keep growing tensions at bay. The stony silence of the PRC in the Mekong River Basin and a fudge of clear political and security claims illustrate that the PRC would not be prepared to take a completely transparent look at this issue. Besides, disagreements between the PRC and the US are infeasible in several fields. This fierce competition and other engagements of ASEAN partners query a responsive ASEAN in power-balance policy and its subtle actions to manage conflict issues in the South China Sea.

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