



Keynote Remarks by

H.E. Dr Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN

Jakarta Forum on ASEAN-China Relations

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Your Excellency Ambassador Hou Yanqi, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to ASEAN;

Your Excellency Ambassador Sarah Al Bakri Devadason, Permanent Representative of Malaysia to ASEAN;

Your Excellency Dr. Dino Patti Djalal, Founder of Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia;

Excellencies, Permanent Representatives of ASEAN Member States to ASEAN;

Excellencies, distinguished participants, ladies, and gentlemen,

1. It is a great honour to join all of you today at this Jakarta Forum, where we will explore how to strengthen ASEAN-China cooperation through enhanced connectivity and stronger people-to-people bonds. I wish to express my sincere gratitude for the opportunity to deliver this keynote address on the theme, "Bridging and Bonding by Connectivity".
2. The theme encapsulates two essential dimensions of the deepening and expanding networks that bring ASEAN and China ever closer: *bridging connectivity* through "hardware" infrastructure and *bonding connectivity* through linking our hearts and minds, fostering our mutual understanding and shared aspirations. *Bridging connectivity* is realized through the robust physical and economic frameworks linking our regions—from transformative infrastructure projects in railways, highways, and energy pipelines to the continually upgraded ASEAN-China Free Trade Area.

These foundational structures enable seamless trade, investment, and market integration, fostering resilience and mutual prosperity.

3. Equally, *bonding connectivity* reflects the human dimension of our partnership. Through cultural exchanges, educational collaborations, and initiatives like the ASEAN-China Cultural Exchange Year, we cultivate mutual understanding, mutual respect, mutual trust, and a shared appreciation for our histories, languages, and traditions. This “heartware”, so to speak, is the core of our trust, solidarity, and common purpose, which in turn strengthens our diplomatic and economic ties.

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4. In 2024, we celebrate 33 years of ASEAN-China dialogue relations, which have matured into a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This stands as one of ASEAN’s most robust, dynamic and meaningful dialogue partnerships, distinguished by the unwavering commitment of our leadership to continually strengthen and adapt our relationship to meet the evolving challenges and demands of our time. This dedication is manifested in extensive cooperation across diverse sectors and pillars, such as trade and investment, culture, and security.
5. In economic areas, China has been ASEAN’s largest trading partner since 2009, with our trade volume surging from US\$178 billion that year to an impressive US\$696.7 billion in 2023. This growth is mirrored in foreign direct investment (FDI), as Chinese investments in ASEAN rose nearly sevenfold over the past two decades, from US\$1.2 billion to US\$17.3 billion in 2023. These impressive numbers tell a compelling story of our deepening economic ties and shared prosperity.
6. As we reflect on these achievements, it’s essential to recognize the vital role of connectivity as the lifeblood of our economies, enabling the movement of goods and services across our borders, bringing our communities and businesses closer together, allowing our tourists to explore more destinations in each other’s countries. This interconnectedness deepens our understanding, fosters trust, and enhances our interdependence, laying the groundwork for a stronger ASEAN-China partnership.

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7. I would like to emphasize the critical importance of forging synergies between our connectivity initiatives, particularly the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and China's Belt and Road Initiative. China's extraordinary economic transformation over the past decades has been driven by the development of a comprehensive and expansive nationwide multi-modal infrastructure network, a backbone that has propelled its growth, transformation and prosperity. This successful infrastructure drive has not only bolstered China's domestic economy but also unlocked significant avenues for Chinese overseas development financing, which has played a crucial role in enhancing connectivity between China and ASEAN as well as building infrastructure among and within ASEAN Member States. By aligning our efforts, we can harness this momentum to create a future defined by unparalleled and unprecedented connectivity and mutual growth.

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8. Now, turning to *bonding connectivity*—the heart-to-heart relationship—I am pleased to highlight the significant progress we have made recently. Just last month, during the 27th ASEAN-China Summit in Vientiane, Lao PDR, our Leaders adopted several key outcome documents, including the Joint Statement on Deepening Cooperation in People-to-People Exchanges. This statement reaffirms our shared belief that the strength of ASEAN-China relations is anchored in the connections among our peoples. It outlines a range of initiatives across education, health, culture, and beyond, which complement our efforts in both physical and digital connectivity.
9. As we carry forward the ASEAN-China Year of People-to-People Exchanges into 2025, we are opening new avenues for cooperation and collaboration. In the words of Ambassador Hou Yanqi in a recent newspaper article, "The ASEAN-China Year of People-to-People Exchanges will build a "heart-to-heart bridge" between China and ASEAN countries." From expanding youth scholarship programs to establishing mechanisms for tourism cooperation, we are placing our peoples at the heart of our collective efforts to foster regional peace, drive innovation, and create shared prosperity.
10. For instance, on the tourism front, whilst Chinese tourist arrivals to ASEAN have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels – where they reached 32.2 million visitors in 2019- there has been a significant rebound. In 2023, Chinese tourist arrivals grew to 10.6 million, up from just 1.1 million in 2022, marking a ten-fold increase. Southeast Asian people are also increasingly flocking to China, with impressions of not only your rich ancient culture and

civilization but also the embodiment of modernity that China has come to represent, as epitomised by your high-speed trains, cutting-edge electric vehicles, and the comprehensive digitalization that permeates every aspect of daily life.

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11. Taking this opportunity, allow me to share my thoughts on how we can elevate our relationship further through *bridging* and *bonding connectivity*.
12. **First**, infrastructure serves as vital arteries linking our region, facilitating trade and enabling our people to move easily and affordably. By investing and promoting sustainable infrastructure, we can unlock new opportunities in trade, investment, education, and tourism, among others.
13. Recognizing the urgent need for infrastructure development, ASEAN has developed the Initial Rolling Priority Pipeline of Infrastructure Projects, which is currently undergoing updates. This Pipeline reflects ongoing and future demands for enhanced connectivity across our Member States, ensuring climate resilience, energy transition, and digital transformation, in addition to the ever-present need for greater linkages across land, sea and air.
14. I see immense opportunities for China to collaborate with ASEAN and its Member States in meeting these infrastructure needs. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China can support the ASEAN Infrastructure Pipeline and leverage its expertise and resources in infrastructure development. The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the Laos-China Railway exemplify our potential for joint sustainable infrastructure projects.
15. **Second**, digital transformation is the defining megatrend of our time; the question is whether we are ahead of the curve or behind it. The ASEAN digital economy is projected to reach US\$1 trillion by 2030 under current trends, but with a successful, effective and ambitious Digital Economy Framework Agreement, we could double that to US\$2 trillion.
16. In parallel, ASEAN and China are upgrading the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA 3.0), with a strong focus on digital economy. This upgrade underscores the growing importance of digital economy not only for our future growth but also for the continued vibrancy of the ASEAN-China economic partnership. Key areas of impact include e-commerce, data flows, and digital payments.

17. To achieve this, we must rethink how societies and businesses thrive in a digital world. Bridging the digital divide within and between ASEAN Member States is essential. Access to the digital ecosystem is crucial for economic growth and social interaction, and we must certainly ensure that all our peoples can benefit from this transformation while mitigating potential pitfalls.
18. Building on the mandate from our leaders at the 27th ASEAN-China Summit, we must enhance cooperation in creating a sustainable and inclusive digital ecosystem. This collaboration will accelerate our digital transformation, strengthen the connections among our peoples while at the same time foster the mutual growth of our digital economies.
19. **Third**, competitive and robust supply chains are essential in today's globalized economy. As each other's largest trading partners, strengthening supply chain connectivity is vital for our economic resilience, reducing vulnerability to disruptions, and enabling rapid and agile responses to changing circumstances. Improving cooperation on logistics and supply chain infrastructure is a key aspect of our partnership. With the substantial conclusion of negotiations for the ASEAN-China FTA 3.0 upgrade, I look forward to its early signing and implementation to further deepen our supply chain connectivity and resilience, and we expect to have it done by next year.
20. **Lastly**, fostering greater people-to-people connectivity is crucial. Cultural and educational exchanges and tourism initiatives help forge lasting bonds. By creating opportunities for our peoples to experience each other's cultures firsthand, we can cultivate deeper understanding and friendship, enhancing our overall ties.
21. For instance, earlier this year, ASEAN and China launched the Chinese Southeast Asia Tourism website, aimed at engaging Chinese travellers interested in visiting ASEAN and the ASEAN Member States. These kinds of initiatives should be supported and encouraged, and we can find creative ways by engaging our youth, utilising technology, and getting various stakeholders including the private sector on board.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies, and gentlemen,

22. Lao PDR's ASEAN Chairmanship 2024 theme of "ASEAN: Enhancing Connectivity and Resilience" underscores the importance of strengthening our interconnections to foster collective growth and resilience. Today's

Forum aligns perfectly with this theme as we explore ways to enhance our bonds through greater connectivity.

23. I am confident that this year's Jakarta Forum will highlight our shared vision of a more interconnected and resilient region, where cooperation not only enhances economic prosperity but also nurtures bonds and mutual understanding among our diverse communities. Enhancing connectivity between ASEAN and China requires steadfast commitment, extensive collaboration, and sustained investment. Our efforts, including the meeting today, to build bridges should be comprehensive and holistic, resulting in win-win outcomes for both sides.
24. I look forward to hearing your great ideas and suggestions on how we can transform these thoughts into practical initiatives. With this, I wish all everyone a fruitful discussion.

Thank you very much.
