



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

At the 23rd China-ASEAN Expo (CAEXPO) Opening Ceremony
under the theme
“ACFTA 3.0 Opportunities, Better Life”

Nanning, China, Thursday, 17 September 2026

Your Excellency Ding Xuexiang, Vice Premier of China,

Your Excellency Cristina Roque, Secretary of the Department of Trade and Industry of the Philippines, Country of Honor and ASEAN Chair 2026,

Excellencies Vice President, Deputy Prime Ministers, Ministers and Senior Officials representatives of ASEAN Member States,

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very good morning!

1. It is a pleasure to join you at the 23rd China–ASEAN Expo (CAEXPO). It has been the fourth consecutive year that I have been attending this CAEXPO. For more than two decades, this platform has brought governments and businesses together, promoted trade and investment, and advanced practical cooperation between ASEAN and China. I want to thank the Government of the People's Republic of China, the People's Government of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and the CAEXPO Secretariat for sustaining this important platform. I wish to also acknowledge the support of various mechanisms, including the ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund (ACCF), in facilitating initiatives such as CAEXPO that delivers tangible outcomes and benefits for the peoples of ASEAN and China.
2. This year's theme, "ACFTA 3.0 Opportunities, Better Life," could not be better timed. We mark the fifth anniversary of the ASEAN–China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership just as we enter a new chapter in our economic relations,

with the ACFTA 3.0 Upgraded Protocol now being implemented. It opens fresh avenues for deeper integration, innovation, and shared prosperity.

3. Consider the scale: ASEAN and China are each other's largest trading partners, with two-way trade exceeding USD 1 trillion in 2025¹. ACFTA has been central to much of this growth: widening market access, strengthening trade and investment flows, and helping businesses plug more deeply into regional and global value chains.
4. The ACFTA 3.0 Upgrade takes this partnership further by expanding cooperation into areas increasingly important to our future competitiveness, including the digital economy, green economy, supply chain connectivity and MSME development. Combining it with the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), it gives ASEAN and China a solid foundation to deepen regional economic integration at a time when the global landscape is shifting fast and becoming uncertain.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. With that in mind, let me highlight three areas where ASEAN and China can build further on the strength of this economic partnership.
6. **First, we should put the new areas of cooperation under ACFTA 3.0 to full use in cultivating new drivers of growth.** There is real potential to deepen cooperation in digitalisation, artificial intelligence, green industries and renewable energy. ASEAN and China can build on the strength of our existing economic relationship by encouraging closer collaboration among businesses, start-ups, investors and research institutions. This would accelerate technology adoption and expand investment in emerging industries.
7. **Second, we should strengthen the coherence between ACFTA 3.0 and RCEP to make trade and investment easier for our businesses.** As both frameworks continue to shape the regional economic architecture, greater coherence can reduce unnecessary complexity, improve regulatory interoperability, and create a more seamless environment for businesses and investors. The General Review of the RCEP Agreement in 2027 offers an excellent opportunity to consider how these complementarities can be strengthened further, while ensuring both frameworks continue to support deeper regional economic integration. I encourage all

¹ ASEAN preliminary data for 2025 places ASEAN-China trade at approximately USD 913.10 billion, while Chinese estimates suggest trade has exceeded USD 1 trillion. <https://chinadata.live/data/china-trade-top-partners/>

stakeholders, especially the business community, to contribute to that review process.

8. **Third, above all, we should ensure that all businesses, especially Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), see practical benefit from ACFTA 3.0 and can participate more broadly in regional supply chains.** MSMEs make up the overwhelming majority of enterprises across ASEAN and China, yet many still face difficulties in accessing markets, technology, finance, and regional production networks. The market access opportunities under ACFTA 3.0 need to translate into tangible benefits for businesses of every size and at every stage of development. That means working together to equip our MSMEs with the capacity, knowledge, digital skills, and necessary tools they need to make effective use of the Agreement, connect to regional markets and production networks, and participate more meaningfully in regional supply chains.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

9. As ASEAN and China enter the next phase of our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, CAEXPO will continue to play a key role in turning the opportunities created by ACFTA 3.0 into stronger business partnerships, wider participation, and creating new sources of growth. I encourage CAEXPO to keep supporting businesses in making fuller use of these opportunities, for greater shared prosperity across ASEAN and China.
10. I wish the 23rd CAEXPO a great success.

Thank you.