



REMARKS

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"ASEAN-CHINA COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS"

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Distinguished Faculty Members, Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Afternoon.

1. I am delighted to be back at this great university for a second time. Let me begin by thanking the China Foreign Affairs University for the invitation to deliver this lecture and to share my views on the latest developments of ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Over the years, this University has provided a valuable platform for diplomats, scholars, and foreign policy practitioners to exchange views on the most pressing issues shaping the international order. It is fitting to have this conversation here, given the University's long and distinguished tradition of scholarship research on China's relations with the wider world, including our region here.
2. It is a pleasure, then, to join you today to speak on "ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: Progress and Prospects." I would like to reflect on three questions: how far ASEAN and China have come, what challenges we must manage together, and where our partnership should go next.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

3. The story of ASEAN-China relations is, in many ways, the story of Asia's remarkable transformation over the past three decades. When ASEAN and China established Dialogue Relations in 1991, the region was a very different place. The Cold War had just ended. Asia's economic miracle was beginning to reshape the global order. The contours of a new regional architecture were still being drawn.
4. A region once defined by the legacies of colonialism has since become one of the most economically dynamic and interconnected in the world. Asia has emerged as the centre of global economic gravity, home to some of the fastest-growing economies, the busiest trade routes, and the most significant strategic dynamics of our time.
5. That positive trajectory now unfolds in a more complex and contested strategic environment. The post-Cold War optimism that once animated regional cooperation has given way to a world defined by intensifying competition, geopolitical strategic rivalry, and genuine uncertainty. It is in this changed context that the ASEAN-China Dialogue Partnership finds both its purpose and its urgency.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. In November 2021, ASEAN and China elevated their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, a milestone after more than three decades of dialogue and cooperation. This year, as we commemorate the Fifth Anniversary of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the 35th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations, it is worth taking stock of what we have built together, and asking where we might go from here.
7. ASEAN and China have established more bilateral cooperation mechanisms than those ASEAN maintains with any other Dialogue Partner, spanning trade and investment, to agriculture, health, education, disaster management, and counter-terrorism, among others. In concrete terms, the China-Laos Railway has transformed a landlocked country into a regional transit hub, and the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, the first of its kind in Southeast Asia, has opened a new chapter for Indonesia's connectivity. These are not just infrastructure projects. For our people, they are expressions of a shared connectivity that would have seemed almost impossible thirty-five years ago.
8. On the economic side, the statistics speak for themselves. Two-way trade in goods between ASEAN and China has crossed the USD 1 trillion threshold. China has been ASEAN's largest trading partner for the past seventeen consecutive years,

and ASEAN has held that position for China for seven years as well. China was the first Dialogue Partner to propose a Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN, leading to the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area in 2002, now in its upgraded third version, which continues to lower barriers and expand opportunities for businesses and workers on both sides. Within the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest free trade agreement by population, ASEAN and China sit at the centre of a web of economic integration reshaping supply chains and trade flows across the Asia-Pacific. RCEP alone accounts for some 30 percent of global population and 30 percent of global GDP.

9. Beyond the headlines, there is the cooperation we do not always see: in health, in education, in disaster response, in the quiet work of the many sectoral mechanisms that make up the day-to-day substance of this partnership. A lot of work goes behind the scenes and is not always reported in the media. The 2024-2025 ASEAN-China Year of People-to-People Exchanges alone generated thousands of connections. Behind each is a person who returned home with friendships, perspectives, and experience broadened. This, to my mind, is one of the real dividends of thirty-five years of investment, and one of the strongest reasons to keep strengthening this partnership. It is people, after all, who sustain relationships and partnerships over the long term.
10. If I may add something a little less solemn to this account of statistics and summits: anyone who has travelled through Southeast Asia recently will have noticed that Chinese brands are no longer merely present there, they are genuinely popular. BYD's electric vehicles are an increasingly common sight on the roads of Bangkok and Jakarta. Mixue's cheerful snowman watches over street corners from Hanoi to Manila, selling bubble tea and ice cream at prices that have made it something of a fixture of student life. Pop Mart's blind boxes have become an object of quiet obsession among young collectors across the region.
11. This reflects a kind of cultural fluency that no joint communiqué could ever produce on its own, and it may do more to shape how a young person in Surabaya, Indonesia or Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia thinks about China than any number of ministerial statements. Call it "China Cool" if you like. Whatever the label, I suspect the students in this room understand it rather better than the diplomats who negotiate our formal agreements.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

12. The ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is more than a diplomatic milestone; it is a deeply substantive relationship. It reflects a sustained commitment by both sides to engage constructively, to manage differences

through dialogue, and to advance practical cooperation across the political, economic, and people-to-people dimensions of our ties. For more than three decades, ASEAN and China have shown the region and the world that sustained dialogue is itself a strategic investment in peace, stability and prosperity.

13. What strikes me most about this relationship is not any single summit or agreement, but the accumulation of decisions, made over three decades by governments and peoples alike, to keep investing in one another even through difficult periods. Today, that investment continues amid intensifying geopolitical competition, economic uncertainty, and rapid technological change. These conditions make dialogue, mutual trust, restraint, and respect for international law more important, not less.
14. They are challenges no country can address alone, whether the governance of emerging technologies, the resilience of supply chains, food and energy security, or the cascading effects of conflicts elsewhere in the world. They call for institutions and frameworks capable of bringing countries together even where differences persist. I say this as someone who has spent much of my professional life in and around ASEAN: the partnership with China is among the deepest and most durable that ASEAN has established.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. Looking ahead, the Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership 2026-2030 charts a course for deeper cooperation in the areas that will define this relationship's next chapter: the digital economy, green energy, supply chain resilience, food security, and the governance of emerging technologies.
16. This partnership also has an important role to play in delivering *ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future*, adopted at the 46th ASEAN Summit last year, which charts a course towards a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred ASEAN Community over the next two decades. Many of the cooperation areas under its four Strategic Plans are areas where the ASEAN-China partnership could make a concrete and meaningful difference, and I believe this is something we will continue to work together.
17. One expression of this is the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), one of the nine strategic goals under the APSC Strategic Plan and a reflection of ASEAN's inclusive framework for cooperation. I was genuinely encouraged when ASEAN and China adopted the joint statement on AOIP cooperation in 2023, and I see real potential in deepening that work through the 2026-2030 Plan of Action, particularly

across the AOIP's four priority areas: maritime cooperation, connectivity, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and economic and other areas of cooperation.

18. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership turning five this year brings to mind a metaphor I find fitting. In human terms, five is the age at which a child begins to make sense of the world around them, forming an early sense of who they are and what they care about. Five years might be young for an ordinary partnership, but this one between ASEAN and China rests on a foundation built over three decades of dialogue. The Partnership itself is young, in terms of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership; the relationship beneath it is fully mature. That combination, real character and depth alongside genuine future potential, says something about the nature of what we have built. I am confident it will continue to grow, to expand, and to deepen provided we do the work of tending to it constantly, consistently, and patiently.
19. As we strengthen the institutional foundations of this partnership, we should also deepen cooperation among universities, diplomatic academies, and think tanks between ASEAN and China through joint research, policy dialogue, faculty and student exchanges, and programmes for emerging diplomats. I want to also congratulate the China Foreign Affairs University here for taking the initiative to train a lot of young diplomats, not only from China but also from ASEAN Member States as well.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

20. Let me close by turning to the students in this room. If this partnership is still young in years, it is your generation that will decide what it grows into, and that is why I want to address you directly, because you will come into place in future to carry on the work we have worked on over the past 35 years. I am sure you will continue to work and invest in this relationship.
21. The ASEAN-China relationship that exists today was built by a generation of diplomats and leaders who made decisions, some of them difficult, to invest in this partnership, to keep dialogue alive, and to see long-term possibility and opportunities in a relationship that was not always easy in the short term. That did not happen by accident. It happened because ASEAN and China chose, deliberately and consistently, to invest in the relationship with each other over time. It happened also because diplomats, scholars, business leaders, and students chose, year after year, to show up and to keep talking, and promoting the relations and cooperation, even when it was difficult.

22. In that regard, I think, is the essential thing to understand about this relationship: it is not a product of convenience. It is a product of sustained, deliberate effort. That work is far from finished. The most consequential chapters of the ASEAN-China story are yet to be written, and you will write part of that story as we continue on that journey together. Doing so will take more than knowledge of policies and negotiations. It will take a real understanding of this region's diversity, the ability to listen across differences, and the wisdom to seek common ground without looking away from what is difficult.
23. The diplomats, scholars, policymakers and researchers in this room today will shape how ASEAN and China navigate the next phase of this relationship, a phase that will bring pressures and potentials as well as possibilities we can only partly anticipate. I hope you will carry that responsibility with a clear sense of the history you have inherited, the complexity you will need to navigate, and the good this relationship is capable of delivering.
24. In the end, the relationship between ASEAN and China is a choice that must be made again and again. A commitment that we have to reaffirm. I am confident it is a choice worth making and promoting consistently over time here and moving forward.

Thank you.

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