



Keynote Remarks

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

The RCEP and ACFTA High-Level Dialogue on Collaborative Growth

Nanning, Guangxi Province, China, 17 September 2026

Your Excellency Wei Tao, Governor of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region,

Your Excellency Yan Dong, Vice Minister of Commerce of the People's Republic of China,

Your Excellencies, Ministers, Vice Ministers, Senior Officials of ASEAN Member States,

Your Excellency, Wang Qing, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to ASEAN

Distinguished Guests, Esteemed participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It is my great pleasure to join you at this High-Level Dialogue on Collaborative Growth.
2. Let me thank the People's Government of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and all co-organisers for convening this Dialogue; bringing together policymakers, businesses, and stakeholders to discuss how we can harness the opportunities offered by two of the most significant economic frameworks in our region: the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA).

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

3. ASEAN-China economic relations have grown steadily for decades. China has been ASEAN's largest trading partner since 2009, and ASEAN has, in turn, been China's largest trading partner for the past seven consecutive years. Last year, ASEAN-China trade surpassed USD one trillion¹, a clear sign of how dynamic and

¹ <https://chinadata.live/data/china-trade-top-partners/>

resilient this partnership has become. China now accounts for 20.9%² of ASEAN's total trade, while ASEAN accounts for 16.6% of China's total trade³ - remaining an important market and production partner for its neighbour.

4. ACFTA, established in 2010, has since grown into one of the region's most successful trade agreements, driving substantial growth in trade, investment, and economic connectivity between ASEAN and China. It has allowed our businesses to integrate more deeply into regional and global value chains, strengthening the economic interdependence and resilience between our two economies.
5. Building on this foundation, ASEAN and China completed the ACFTA 3.0 Upgrade Protocol last year, opening a new chapter of cooperation in which the digital economy, the green economy, and supply chain connectivity offer fresh pathways for our businesses and our peoples.
6. At the broader regional level, RCEP deepens economic integration across the Asia-Pacific. As the world's largest free trade agreement, it brings together 15 economies representing around 30 per cent of the global GDP and population. RCEP gives us a common framework that simplifies trade procedures, improves rules of origin, promotes supply chain connectivity, and creates a more predictable environment for business. This allows firms to source inputs more efficiently, reach wider markets, and integrate into regional production networks. In doing so, it strengthens our collective economic resilience.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

7. Together, ACFTA and RCEP have given us a strong foundation for long-term economic cooperation. Let me share three areas where ASEAN and China can work together to unlock their full potential.
8. **First, we must use both RCEP and ACFTA 3.0 to strengthen the competitiveness of our MSMEs.** As the backbone of our economies, MSMEs account for the vast majority of enterprises and employment, yet many still struggle to access international markets, technology, finance, and production networks. Strengthening their competitiveness, resilience, and participation in regional and global value chains should be a central pillar of our economic cooperation. RCEP and ACFTA 3.0 give us complementary tools to do so.
9. ASEAN and China should establish dedicated MSME support programmes. These should improve the use of RCEP and ACFTA preferences, expand digital trade and

² ASEANStats, as of 1 July 2026

³ <https://china-cee.eu/2026/03/23/review-of-chinas-foreign-trade-in-2025-and-outlook-for-2026-observing-its-resilient-breakthrough-and-leap-in-value-as-it-navigates-a-complex-and-evolving-landscape/>

e-commerce capabilities, and connect MSMEs with multinational enterprises through business matching. Cooperation on innovation, technology adoption, digital skills, and workforce upskilling is equally essential. It will help MSMEs move into higher value-added activities. We should also promote interoperable digital platforms, paperless trade, innovation partnerships, and better access to financing. These steps will help smaller firms scale up, integrate into regional supply chains, and seize new opportunities in the digital and green economies.

10. **Second, we should reinforce the complementarities between ACFTA 3.0 and RCEP through the upcoming General Review of the RCEP Agreement, with a view to promoting regulatory coherence and reducing unnecessary complexity for businesses and investors.** As ACFTA 3.0 expands into new areas such as the digital economy, supply chain connectivity, and MSME development, we need to ensure that these initiatives complement and strengthen the wider regional framework that RCEP provides. This means working together to enhance regulatory interoperability, avoid duplicating administrative burdens, and create a business environment that is genuinely predictable and efficient.
11. The General Review of RCEP, commencing in 2027, gives us a valuable opportunity to promote regulatory coherence, align our implementation approaches and reduce unnecessary complexity for all our businesses and investors, especially for MSMEs.
12. **Third, we must use ACFTA 3.0 and RCEP to support an inclusive and resilient global supply chain, and to strengthen food and energy security amid growing geo-economic uncertainty.** With geopolitical tensions, economic fragmentation, and climate-related disruptions all on the rise, our shared priority must be to preserve the openness, connectivity, and reliability of regional and global production networks.
13. ACFTA 3.0 and RCEP give ASEAN and China a strong platform to deepen dialogue on emerging economic challenges, strengthen supply chain cooperation, improve connectivity, and diversify our trade and investment flows. We should also use this platform to address issues affecting regional trade and investment, including supply chain disruptions and global economic uncertainty. At the same time, we should deepen cooperation in sustainable agriculture, food trade, renewable energy, and regional energy connectivity, to ensure stable, affordable, and sustainable access to critical resources. Together, these efforts can build supply chains that are more agile and more shock-resistant, enabling our businesses to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing global economic landscape.

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14. Let me close with this thought: the success of RCEP and ACFTA will not be measured only in trade volumes or investment figures, but ultimately in how effectively these agreements create opportunities, strengthen competitiveness, support inclusive growth, and improve the lives of our peoples.
15. I encourage all stakeholders; governments, businesses, industry associations, and all other partners; to take ownership of these agreements. Governments must continue to provide policy support and an enabling economic environment; businesses must actively pursue new opportunities; and industry associations, academia, and other partners must work together to bridge knowledge gaps, so that the benefits of integration reach all segments of our community and society.
16. I have every confidence that this Dialogue will chart a productive path forward for our businesses and for our peoples.
17. I wish this meeting a great success.

Thank You.
