

Review and Prospects of China-‘Global South’ Cooperation Achievements under the Framework of the Belt and Road Initiative: A Case Study of ASEA

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Abstract

Amidst the unprecedented changes unseen in a century, the strategic significance of the “Global South” has become increasingly prominent. Research on the “Global South” has emerged with new analytical perspectives across various academic disciplines. As a natural member of the “Global South” and a key leader in South-South cooperation, China has successively introduced strategic initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. Drawing on its own developmental experiences, China has continuously deepened new forms of South-South cooperation with “Global South” countries. Among these efforts, China-ASEAN relations have become a paradigm of success and vitality within Asia-Pacific regional cooperation. This paper, set against the backdrop of the BRI, focuses on analyzing the multifaceted cooperative achievements between China and ASEAN, a representative entity of the “Global South.” It further explores pathways for fostering new forms of South-South cooperation with emerging developing powers and proposes China’s strategies for building a shared destiny for the “Global South,” thereby enhancing its cohesiveness and solidarity.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Global South, ASEAN, Global Governance.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the collective rise of “Global South” countries has emerged as a significant factor influencing changes in the international order and global governance. Against the backdrop of great power competition, the “four deficits” in global governance have continued to worsen, highlighting the urgent need for systematic and practical global public goods to integrate international efforts and collectively promote the building of a community with a shared future for humankind. Furthermore, the increasing overall influence of ASEAN within the “Global South” has drawn significant attention. Former Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani noted that by 2023, ASEAN is becoming a leader of the “Global South,” and its experience in engaging with major powers offers valuable lessons for other regions and nations. As a natural member of the “Global South” and a key leader in South-South cooperation, China has successively proposed strategic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. Building on its own developmental experiences, China has continuously deepened new forms of South-South cooperation with “Global South” countries. In his address at the closing ceremony of the BRICS Business Forum in Johannesburg, President Xi Jinping stated, “As a developing country and a member of the ‘Global South,’ we have always shared the same breath and destiny with other developing countries, firmly safeguarding their common interests and working to enhance the representation and voice of emerging markets and

developing countries in global affairs.” In the future, how China can promote the collective development of “Global South” countries, build a community with a shared destiny for the “Global South,” and advance the improvement of global governance mechanisms remains a critical subject worthy of in-depth exploration and the formulation of innovative strategies.

This paper, set against the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), focuses on analyzing the multifaceted cooperative achievements between China and ASEAN, a representative entity of the “Global South.” The paper is structured into five sections:

First, the introductory section outlines the research question. The second section discusses ASEAN’s role as a “leader” among “Global South” countries and its critical position in fostering multilateral cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

Next, the third section reviews and explores the remarkable achievements of China-ASEAN cooperation under the BRI, focusing on two dimensions: multi-sector economic and trade collaboration and connectivity development. This section highlights the significant advantages of China’s strategies represented by the BRI.

The fourth section, building on the current China-ASEAN cooperation, examines the numerous challenges China might face in pursuing new forms of South-South cooperation with “Global South” countries in the future.

Finally, the conclusion argues that China should continue to use the implementation of its three major global initiatives as strategic guidance, promote closer alignment between the BRI and development strategies such as the “ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2025,” and respond to the “exclusive” actions of Western countries. It emphasizes the importance of exploring practical pathways for new forms of South-South cooperation with emerging developing powers and strengthening the cohesion of the “Global South.”

2. The Leader of the “Global South”: The “ASEAN Way” and the Practice of ASEAN Centrality

As a leading force within the “Global South,” ASEAN has established itself as a model for South-South cooperation, particularly in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s. By adhering to the “ASEAN Way,” strengthening internal cohesion, and deepening multilateral cooperation, ASEAN has developed a unique set of principles and practices, exemplified by the “ASEAN+” framework. This approach has not only positioned ASEAN as a paradigm of the “Global South” but has also contributed to what is widely recognized as the “ASEAN Miracle,” drawing global attention. The core of the “ASEAN Way” lies in its commitment to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, a consensus-based decision-making mechanism, and an emphasis on unity and cooperation. It prioritizes dialogue, consultation, and consensus-building to resolve issues. This approach aligns with the historical and cultural traditions of ASEAN member states and resonates with the broader aspiration of “Global South” countries for independence, autonomy, and equitable cooperation. Under ASEAN’s leadership, “Global South” countries have increasingly engaged in global governance, collectively working towards a more just and equitable international order.

In 2022, ASEAN experienced a “summit season.” From November 11 to 13, the ASEAN Summit and the East Asia Summit were held in Cambodia; from November 15 to 16, the 17th G20 Summit took place in Indonesia; and from November 18 to 19, the APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting was convened in Thailand. Against the backdrop of major transformations in the international landscape triggered by the Ukraine crisis, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Thailand, serving as the rotating chairs of ASEAN, G20, and APEC, respectively, successfully hosted three major international conferences within ten days. This marked a defining “Asian moment” in global governance. Building upon this, Southeast Asian countries leveraged their experience in host diplomacy to deepen regional cooperation. This not only facilitated face-to-face meetings

between the Chinese and U.S. presidents—creating an opportunity to ease escalating strategic tensions between the two powers—but also extended the consensus-driven “ASEAN Way” to the broader Asia-Pacific region. This process contributed to the implementation and refinement of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), strengthening cooperation and linkages among “Global South” countries. These developments underscore ASEAN’s leadership role within the “Global South” and highlight the innovative value of the “ASEAN Way.”

In June 2019, during the 34th ASEAN Summit, ASEAN introduced the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which focused on multi-sector regional cooperation while emphasizing ASEAN centrality, regional discourse power, and an open and inclusive regional architecture. The AOIP and the reaffirmation of ASEAN centrality have been regarded as a “third pathway” for “Global South” countries to shape the Asia-Pacific order amid overlapping regional cooperation frameworks. This initiative represents a significant effort to reshape the regional order and is expected to contribute to the development of an Asia-Pacific governance framework that is more open and inclusive. Amid the ongoing U.S.-China competition over regional order adjustments, ASEAN’s policy autonomy and proactiveness are prominently reflected in the conceptual, regulatory, and cooperative restructuring outlined in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). By incorporating great power neutrality, ASEAN mitigates intense power confrontations in the material domain and guides relevant countries toward regional cooperation. Through the development of a normative framework, ASEAN aims to uphold the legitimacy of its institutions, reshape the regional order, and manage great power competition.[5] This approach facilitates the achievement of the political objectives set forth in the AOIP, namely maintaining a balance of power among major states, ensuring ASEAN centrality, and reinforcing Southeast Asia’s geopolitical significance.[6]

Furthermore, the maintenance of ASEAN centrality is particularly evident in the realm of maritime security. ASEAN has established its priority position within the institutional framework through four key strategic approaches: institutional design, constraint strategies, reciprocal strategies, and norm-building. These mechanisms have enabled ASEAN to develop and sustain a regional maritime security cooperation framework centered on ASEAN, ensuring its leadership in shaping regional maritime governance.[7]

3. A Model for “Global South” Cooperation: China-ASEAN Relations under the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has provided a practical platform for building a community with a shared future for humankind. The cooperation between China and ASEAN has continuously deepened across multiple domains, particularly in economic and trade collaboration and connectivity development. This partnership has not only facilitated overall economic progress in Southeast Asia but has also injected new momentum into China’s economic growth while enhancing the international status of “Global South” countries.

3.1. Increasingly Closer Multisectoral Economic and Trade Cooperation

Driven by the BRI, economic and trade exchanges between China and ASEAN have become increasingly robust. According to official ASEAN statistics, the total volume of trade between China and ASEAN countries has shown a consistent upward trend, significantly surpassing the trade volume between the United States and ASEAN, see [Figure 1](#). Investment flows have expanded, and people-to-people exchanges have become more frequent. Since the launch of the BRI, the average annual growth rate of China-ASEAN trade has reached 8.8%, exceeding China’s overall trade growth rate by 3.8 percentage points over the same period. In 2023, bilateral trade continued to grow, reaching a total value of 6.41 trillion yuan. ASEAN has maintained its position as China’s largest trading partner for four consecutive years, while China has remained

ASEAN’s largest trading partner for many years.[8] On January 1, 2010, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, the largest free trade zone among developing countries, was officially launched in full scale. As part of this agreement, China reduced tariffs to zero for 93% of products from six ASEAN countries. This institutionalized market liberalization has strengthened the industrial and supply chains of both sides, facilitated the construction of new production and supply networks, and promoted trade and investment cooperation. Consequently, it has enhanced the overall productivity of the China-ASEAN region, demonstrating the practical value of the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind in advancing international trade and driving economic growth.

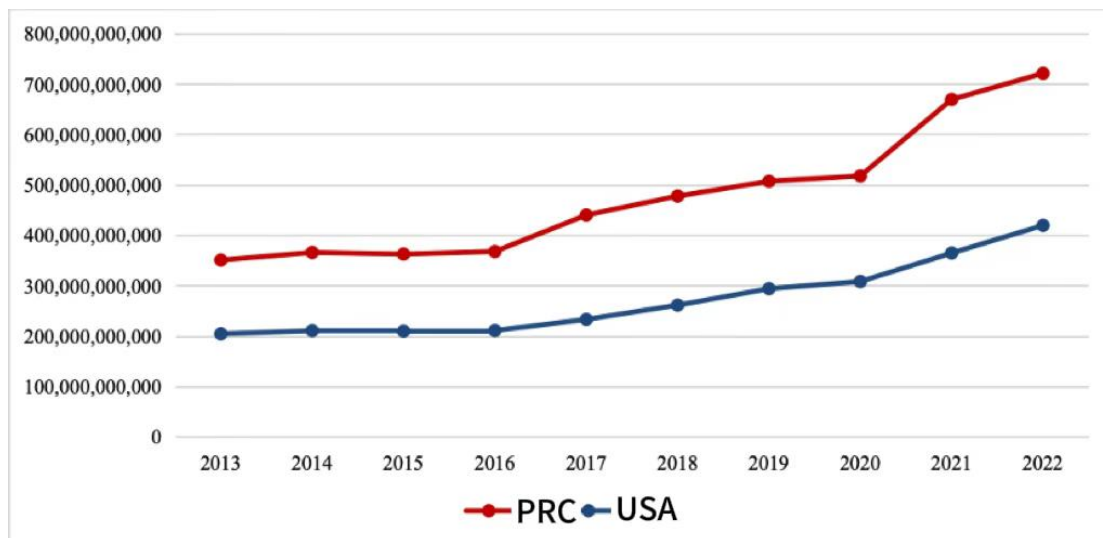


Figure 1: Two or more references Total Goods Import and Export Trade Volume Between China, the U.S., and ASEAN Countries (2013-2022) (Unit: USD)[9]

In 2020, China introduced the Global Data Security Initiative to effectively address global data security risks and challenges while contributing to the development of the digital economy with Chinese expertise. In November of the same year, at the opening ceremony of the 17th China-ASEAN Expo and the China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit, President Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of “building the China-ASEAN Information Port and creating a ‘Digital Silk Road.’”

In November 2021, China officially proposed joining the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA), the world’s first purely digital, modular, and non-binding regional trade agreement. This initiative aligns with China’s broader vision of “Digital China, Digital Silk Road” and its strategy to become a technological powerhouse while further deepening digital economic cooperation with regional countries.

In November 2022, China and ASEAN jointly announced the official launch of negotiations for the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area 3.0. The two sides engaged in comprehensive and ongoing discussions across multiple domains, including the digital economy, green economy, goods trade, and investment, aiming to enhance trade and investment liberalization and facilitation within the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area.[10] As a priority in China’s neighborhood diplomacy and a key cooperation region under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), deepening digital economic cooperation between China and ASEAN holds significant importance for advancing the BRI. At the same time, it will also facilitate the joint efforts of China and ASEAN in promoting global digitalization.

3.2. Significant Improvement in Connectivity

Strategic alignment and infrastructure connectivity serve as both policy and material foundations for enhancing the overall strength of “Global South” countries. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has actively aligned with Vietnam’s “Two Corridors and One Circle” strategy, Indonesia’s “Global Maritime Fulcrum” vision, Cambodia’s “Quadrangle Strategy,” Brunei’s “Wawasan 2035,” Thailand’s “Thailand 4.0” strategy, and the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2025 (MPAC 2025). Additionally, the BRI has fostered mutually beneficial cooperation with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), emphasizing the formulation of a regional Public-Private Partnership (PPP) development agenda and exploring potential synergies with subregional frameworks such as the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program (GMS). Over the past decade, China-ASEAN connectivity has steadily improved.[11] SEAN has engaged in extensive cooperation with major powers through its key cooperation mechanisms, such as “ASEAN+1,” “ASEAN+3,” “ASEAN+6,” the East Asia Summit, and the Greater Mekong Subregion framework. Leveraging these platforms, ASEAN has provided opportunities for external actors to participate in regional connectivity development through consultation, fostering healthy competition and diversified choices to maximize its own interests. This approach has enabled ASEAN to secure cost-effective connectivity investments and services that align with its development needs.

As a crucial component of the “Six Corridors, Six Roads, Multiple Countries, Multiple Ports” connectivity framework, ASEAN has made remarkable progress in infrastructure development. These advancements have not only improved regional transportation connectivity but also created favorable conditions for economic growth. One of the key success stories of BRI-MPAC 2025 synergy is the China-Laos Railway. The construction of this railway has generated over 110,000 jobs for local communities in Laos and facilitated the development of nearly 2,000 kilometers of roads and canals along its route. The railway has significantly reduced travel time from Vientiane to the China-Laos border, cutting it from 12 hours to less than 3 hours.[12] This infrastructure project has brought tangible benefits to Laos, deepened its involvement in AOIP connectivity initiatives, and strengthened regional economic integration.

According to data from Kunming Customs, as of December 2022, the China-Laos Railway had operated a total of 3,508 cross-border train services, transporting 92,000 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) of containers and carrying 1.918 million tons of import and export goods, with a total trade value of 13.14 billion yuan.[13] Both the volume and value of cross-border freight have shown a rapid growth trend. The railway has played a crucial role in transforming Laos from a “landlocked country” into a “land-linked country,” providing strong support for the deepened development of China-ASEAN trade and facilitating the high-quality advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its contribution to ASEAN’s land transportation as a “golden corridor” continues to be evident.

Furthermore, the construction of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor has fostered a new regional strategic interaction between China’s western regions and ASEAN countries. In addition, China has actively participated in connectivity development in Southeast Asia’s energy, information, and other sectors, contributing to the shared development of ASEAN nations.

4. Prospects and Challenges for China-“Global South” Cooperation: Internal Development Imbalances and Western Geopolitical Competition

4.1. Internal Development Imbalances: Infrastructure Deficiencies and the Digital Divide

Despite the significant rise in the overall strength of “Global South” countries, attracting widespread global attention, they remain emerging economies and developing nations, where internal economic disparities are particularly pronounced. The lack of balanced development within these countries, especially infrastructure deficiencies in certain regions, poses a major obstacle to deepening China’s cooperation with “Global South” nations, particularly ASEAN. This imbalance is also a key factor constraining ASEAN’s overall development progress.

For instance, Indonesia, ASEAN’s largest economy and a “middle power,” possesses vast territorial land, yet its island infrastructure development remains slow and underdeveloped. The lack of efficient and convenient inter-island connectivity results in significantly higher transportation costs for goods from Jakarta to other domestic islands compared to importing goods from abroad. This exacerbates Indonesia’s economic pressures and development challenges. Similarly, before the launch of the China-Laos Railway, Laos—Southeast Asia’s only landlocked country—struggled with severe economic constraints. In 2018, 18.3% of its population lived below the poverty line, highlighting the significant impact of its landlocked status on economic development.[14]

Furthermore, ASEAN countries face significant funding shortages for infrastructure development. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), developing countries in Asia will require an annual infrastructure investment of \$1.7 trillion by 2030 to sustain economic growth, address poverty, and combat climate change. Within the 2016-2030 climate-adjusted total investment demand, \$14.7 trillion is projected to be allocated to the power sector, \$8.4 trillion to transportation, \$2.3 trillion to telecommunications, and \$800 billion to water and sanitation infrastructure.[15] However, the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund (AIF), established in 2011, had an initial total equity capital of only \$485.3 million,[16] which is far from sufficient to meet the region’s massive infrastructure financing needs and falls significantly short of the necessary annual loan disbursements for ASEAN.

In the digital economy sector, while ASEAN’s internet penetration rate is relatively high and has been growing rapidly compared to the global average, disparities in economic and social development among Southeast Asian countries have led to imbalanced digital growth, creating a pronounced “digital divide.” This divide has become a weak link in China-ASEAN digital economic cooperation, particularly in cross-border collaboration. Some ASEAN member states have weaker information technology (IT) infrastructure and lower levels of digitalization compared to other economies. These disparities lead to challenges in data security cooperation, including inconsistent technical standards and underdeveloped legal frameworks for data protection, which pose significant barriers to deeper collaboration. While most Southeast Asian countries have internet penetration rates exceeding 70%, nations such as Laos, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste still lack widespread household internet access.[17] The rapid development of digitally advanced countries with superior technology and financial resources may further widen the gap between developed and underdeveloped nations within the region, making it increasingly difficult to bridge the digital divide.

Another key aspect of the digital divide is the unequal allocation of resources in digital economic cooperation. Due to financial constraints, ASEAN member states face disparities in digital capabilities, cybersecurity, and data protection, which hinder progress in digital economic collaboration. Successful digital economy development requires joint investments

from all parties to improve digital infrastructure, enhance cybersecurity measures, and strengthen data protection frameworks. However, given their limited economic capacity and domestic fiscal pressures, many ASEAN member states struggle to meet these investment requirements.

Additionally, ASEAN countries face significant shortages in technology and talent. The region lacks a robust pipeline for training and recruiting digital security professionals, making it difficult to develop a skilled workforce with expertise in cybersecurity and data governance. This talent gap severely impacts ASEAN's ability to ensure cross-border data security and affects the effectiveness and quality of its digital cooperation with China. While countries like Singapore and Malaysia have relatively advanced technology and strong talent pools, other ASEAN member states face notable weaknesses in these areas. The absence of a systematic approach to digital talent development has created a shortage of skilled professionals, further weakening ASEAN's overall capabilities in the digital economy. Without high-end technology and expert personnel, ASEAN struggles to meet its increasing data security demands and fully leverage digital economic opportunities.

4.2. Western Geopolitical Competition: Interest Struggles and Internal Divisions

As great power competition intensifies, the strategic value of the "Global South" has become increasingly prominent. Western countries have begun to place greater emphasis on the "Global South" as a crucial middle-ground force, seeking to cultivate alliances among developing countries and position themselves as "leaders" of the Global South. This effort is aimed at exerting control over Global South affairs and instrumentalizing the concept of the Global South to exclude and counterbalance China.

The United States, Europe, Japan, and other external powers, along with international organizations, have successively introduced Indo-Pacific strategies, further highlighting ASEAN's geopolitical strategic importance as a key player within the "Global South." The geopolitical competition between the West and China, particularly in Southeast Asia's digital and technology sectors, is expected to intensify regional interest struggles and internal divisions within ASEAN. This will have negative implications for China-ASEAN digital economic cooperation.

As early as 2018, in the ASEAN-U.S. Leaders' Statement on Cybersecurity Cooperation, the United States committed to further strengthening its engagement in the field of cybersecurity and deepening its cooperation with ASEAN. Additionally, Washington pledged to actively encourage the involvement of stakeholders from academia, civil society, and other sectors in cybersecurity initiatives.[18] In the same year, Singapore signed a cybersecurity partnership agreement with the United States and Canada, which specifically covered data sharing, joint technology certification programs, and capacity-building initiatives.

On October 8, 2021, the United States and ASEAN held the second ASEAN-U.S. Cyber Policy Dialogue, demonstrating Washington's increasing focus on ASEAN in the fields of digital economy and cybersecurity.[19] In 2022, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy reaffirmed Washington's commitment to strengthening its long-term presence and investment in the Indo-Pacific region, emphasizing close cooperation with ASEAN to enhance its resilience as a leading regional multilateral institution.[20] Building on this strategy, the Biden administration introduced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) as an extension of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, officially proposing it during the 2022 U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit. One of its primary objectives was to establish cross-border data flow regulations for the Indo-Pacific region.[21]

The intensifying U.S. geopolitical competition in Southeast Asia, along with its exclusive cooperation in the field of data security, is likely to force internal divisions among ASEAN countries. Under pressure from the U.S. and Western countries, ASEAN members may be

compelled to “take sides”, further constraining their digital economic cooperation with China. This development will also limit China’s role in shaping digital governance in Southeast Asia, reducing its influence in China-ASEAN digital economic cooperation and further straining bilateral relations.

Additionally, territorial sovereignty disputes and resource allocation conflicts in the South China Sea between China and several ASEAN member states have long been a major obstacle to deepening China-ASEAN relations. Western countries have exploited these divisions by promoting the “China Threat Theory” in Southeast Asia, further undermining strategic trust between China and ASEAN.

In recent years, China has made significant advancements in data security cooperation technologies, and ASEAN’s need for deeper cooperation with China in this domain has increased. However, under the influence of the “China Threat Theory,” some ASEAN countries harbor concerns that reliance on China for technology, funding, and standards in data cooperation might compromise their “digital sovereignty.”

Furthermore, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, perceptions of China within ASEAN have become increasingly divergent across different countries and social groups. This divergence has introduced greater uncertainty and complexity in efforts to further deepen China-ASEAN cooperation.

5. Conclusion

This paper, set against the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), focuses on analyzing the multifaceted cooperation achievements between China and ASEAN, a representative entity of the “Global South.” It also explores the potential risks and challenges that China and ASEAN may face in further deepening their cooperation in the future.

Currently, the collective rise of “Global South” countries has garnered significant global attention. However, disparities in development levels among member states have resulted in diverse demands and priorities, leading to a weaker sense of group identity within the “Global South.” As a result, its cohesion and internal solidarity remain underdeveloped. If this issue is not effectively addressed in the long term, the Global South’s ability to shape the future global order will be significantly weakened.

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