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Creating Strategic Opportunities: The Concept and Practice of China-ASEAN Security Cooperation*

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Abstract

The cooperation between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) began with the establishment of dialogue relations between the two sides after the ending of the Cold War. In 1994, when the ASEAN Regional Forum was established, China was one of the founding members, marking the beginning of formal security cooperation between China and ASEAN. The decision to shift to cooperation/enhance willingness to cooperate was made by the two parties after taking stock of the international and regional situation and their respective interests in the wake of the collapse of the bipolar system. Security cooperation was driven by a consensus on seizing, creating and maintaining strategic opportunities; or more specifically, by taking advantage of development opportunities and striving to maintain regional stability in difficult situations, thus creating a peaceful and amicable strategic regional context for sustainable development. The core concept of China-ASEAN security cooperation is developmental peace, with the norms of cooperation being the ASEAN way, cooperative security, the new security concept and the Asian security concept. In practice, China-ASEAN security cooperation covers three dimensions—strategic stability, management and control of high tension issues, and practical cooperation. New opportunities and challenges are emerging in the new era for China-ASEAN security cooperation. Fundamentally speaking, the two sides need to strive for the goal of building an ASEAN community and a China-ASEAN community with a shared future and to properly coordinate the strategic positioning of the long-term core interests of both parties.

Keywords: China-ASEAN relations, strategic opportunities, developmental peace, security cooperation, ASEAN community, China-ASEAN community with a shared future

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I. Rethinking Security Cooperation

2021 marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of dialogue relations between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Over the past 30 years, the China-ASEAN relationship has changed for the better under the leadership of both parties, with the dialogue partnership elevated to a strategic partnership.¹ In sharp contrast to the upgrading of strategic relations is the fact that strategic security research has been lagging over the years. In the existing literature, ASEAN relationships with China and the United States have been characterized as a dual structure: “ASEAN prioritizes its economic ties with China while intensifying security cooperation with the United States.” China-ASEAN cooperation on security is assumed to have lagged far behind cooperation in other fields. But how are we to understand the upgrading of bilateral relations and the lack of momentum in security cooperation? Does security cooperation between the two parties fall far short of expectations? To clarify these questions, we need to see China-ASEAN security cooperation in a new light.

Since the end of the Cold War, the paradigm of international security research has undergone profound changes: the scope of security has been expanded and the issue of how to ensure and strengthen security reconsidered. Security in the narrow sense tends to focus mainly on material power, whereas security research hinges on the state’s control and use of military power. After the Cold War, however, the scope of security expanded from military security to the political, economic, social and environmental sectors.² In this article, security is discussed in the broader sense, covering both traditional and non-traditional security. In November 2020, China and ASEAN signed the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Joint Declaration on the China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2021-2025), a recently published document offering authoritative guidance and top-level design for steering and guiding China-ASEAN cooperation. In the “Politics and Security Cooperation” section, the document details political and security dialogue, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty, the South China Sea issue, cooperation on human rights, transnational crime and other non-traditional security issues, anti-corruption cooperation and defense cooperation.³ Given the viability of the research, the contents of the Action Plan are used as “food for thought” in the study of China-ASEAN security cooperation. This article combs through and comments on the evolution, core concepts and important practices in China-ASEAN security cooperation and then suggests new pathways for fostering bilateral security cooperation against the backdrop of the opportunities and challenges in the new era.

1 Premier Li Keqiang said, “China is ready to take the 30th anniversary as an opportunity to upgrade bilateral relations to a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership.’” Li Keqiang, “Speech at the 23rd China-ASEAN Leaders’ Meeting.”

2 Peter J. Katzenstein, “Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security,” p. 9.

3 “Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2021-2025).”

II. Strategic Opportunities: The Origin and Evolution of China-ASEAN Security Cooperation

The security cooperation between China and ASEAN has been affected not only by the international and regional environment, but also by internal factors on both sides. Creating and maintaining strategic opportunities is the driving force and *raison d'être* of China-ASEAN security cooperation. After the Cold War, at a time of major transformation in the international landscape, both China and ASEAN needed a peaceful and stable regional environment to maintain rapid growth, promote East Asian economic integration, and boost their standing in the international political and economic arena. For China, cooperation with ASEAN would help build an amicable neighborhood environment and secure sustainable, rapidly evolving strategic regional support. For ASEAN, cooperation with China would on the one hand allow ASEAN to share in China's growth dividend, and on the other hand enable it, by welcoming China into the ASEAN-led regional integration process, to reduce the uncertainty of a rising power, facilitate China's international socialization, and effectively address regional instability and security threats that could result from changing power structures, thus better safeguarding and maintaining the ASEAN nations' security. China-ASEAN security cooperation began after the end of the Cold War and has since unfolded in three phases. The initial phase, marked by the establishment of dialogue relations between the two sides and China's accession to the ASEAN Regional Forum, can be traced back to the 1990s; the 2000s ushered in a phase of strategic stability, marked by China's decision to join the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia; and in the third phase the two sides have been committed to safeguarding regional security since the 2008 global financial crisis, marked by the China-ASEAN Defense Ministers Informal Meeting and the signing of the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea between the two sides.

1. The launching of security cooperation

In the early 1990s, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the bipolar structure collapsed, and the new and the old world order crossed paths in a period of major change. China and ASEAN countries established a dialogue relationship in 1991, inaugurating a new chapter in the relationship between the two in terms of trust building and institutionalized cooperation.⁴ In 1992, China put forward a proposal to the ASEAN countries for "setting aside disputes and pursuing joint development," expressing its willingness to resolve disputes through negotiations when conditions were ripe.⁵ In 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum was established, with China as one of its founding members. In 1996, China became a comprehensive ASEAN dialogue partner. After the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, China kept the RMB stable despite pressure to devalue, contributing in no small measure to the maintenance of regional financial stability. In the same year, the first China-

4 *Report of the ASEAN-China Eminent Persons Group.*

5 Fu Ying and Wu Shicun, "South China Sea: How We Got to This Stage."

ASEAN summit was held and the leaders of both sides jointly promoted the establishment of a cooperation mechanism between ASEAN and China, Japan and South Korea. Since then, the East Asia integration process has been fast tracked. On the basis of a series of institutionalized arrangements, the cooperation between China and ASEAN has been embedded in the regional institutional framework of “ASEAN+.”

The initiation of the dialogue relationship between China and ASEAN was primarily made possible by the improvement of bilateral relations between China and Southeast Asian nations since the late 1970s and the formation of a habit of cooperation.⁶ Since the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Communist Party of China Central Committee, developing a partnership of good neighborliness and mutual trust with Southeast Asian countries has become one of the priorities of China’s diplomatic work. Deng Xiaoping attached great importance to forging good relationships with Southeast Asian countries, deeming it crucial in ensuring good neighborliness and creating a good external environment for China’s modernization drive. At the same time, China actively participated in the entire process of a political settlement of the Cambodia conflict, playing an important role in eliminating regional conflict hotspots and easing regional tensions. In the 1990s, China resumed diplomatic relations with Indonesia, successively established diplomatic relations with Singapore and Brunei, and made significant progress in relations with Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Deng Xiaoping reaffirmed the role of ASEAN in improving and developing relations with Southeast Asian countries, pointing out that ASEAN was pivotal in maintaining peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and that China supported ASEAN in its efforts to play a more active role in regional and international affairs.⁷

Taking stock of the international situation and weighing national interests against it, China has actively sought to establish a cooperative relationship with ASEAN and has promoted the East Asian integration process. After the Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee, striving for a lasting and peaceful international and neighborhood environment for economic development became the central task of China’s diplomatic work. Deng Xiaoping frequently alluded to the pace of development and the development experience of East and South-East Asia and stressed that the Asia-Pacific region held the world’s greatest promise, noting that the “Asia-Pacific Century” would not have been possible without China’s development.⁸ Therefore, conditional on maintaining domestic stability, further improving China’s neighborhood environment and seizing the opportunity to achieve rapid economic and social development is in China’s strategic interests.

As was the case in China, the theme of war has given way to economic development in the ASEAN countries. Since World War II, Southeast Asia has gone through decades of wars, conflicts and turmoil. It was not until the 1970s and ’80s that the East Asian economic system took shape: the United States opened its market to Southeast Asia; manufacturers from Japan,

6 Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng, *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace*, p. 99.

7 Compilation Team, *Essentials of Deng Xiaoping Thought on Diplomacy*, pp. 127-130.

8 Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 3, pp. 353-369.

South Korea and China's Taiwan region began to actively seek suppliers there; China began to open up the outside world; and the leaders of East Asia and ASEAN countries reached consensus on opening up their economies to the outside world, marking the first step toward a mature Asian business and policy network. Drawing on the economic development experience and best practice of Japan and the Four Asian Tigers, ASEAN countries, realizing that integration into the broader East Asian economic system was the key to achieving rapid economic growth, entered a rapid growth phase. A good regional growth environment in East Asia was thus requisite for promoting further development and maintaining long-term prosperity.⁹

The South China Sea issue, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis represent challenges to traditional security, institutionalized security, and non-traditional security respectively. How does China, with its growing national power, define and pursue its own security interests in the region? Is China seeking to establish dominance or playing a zero-sum game? This has always been a source of doubt and anxiety for ASEAN countries. China has responded actively to these major issues of concern by taking part in ASEAN's dialogue, consultation and institutional arrangements and by taking steps to address the regional financial crisis. These measures have resolved ASEAN's misgivings, strengthened ASEAN's awareness of regional strategic opportunities, and encouraged ASEAN to enhance all-round cooperation with China and to seize the opportunities brought about by China's growth.

In July 1994, the first meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum was held, ushering in an era of peace, stability and cooperation in Southeast Asia.¹⁰ With the end of the Cold War, ASEAN countries were worried about a possible power vacuum and potential regional conflicts in East and Southeast Asia; but at the same time, they were developing a growing regional consciousness of independence and self-reliance. This prompted them to take the lead in establishing the ASEAN Regional Forum, with a view to bringing all stakeholders together within a regional security dialogue. On the one hand, the Forum facilitates checks and balances among major powers; on the other, it promotes "cooperative security norms," encouraging the powers' international socialization. ASEAN plans to use the ASEAN Regional Forum as a platform for advancing regional security cooperation through the three stages of building trust, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution. While the Forum was in the making, China showed interest in participating in regional multilateral security dialogues, stating that "It is possible, on the basis of actual circumstances, to conduct bilateral and regional security dialogues in various forms, at different levels and through multiple channels, so as to launch negotiations over issues and concerns and to enhance communication and foster trust."¹¹

2. *Building strategic stability*

The 21st century ushered in a stage of strategic stability in terms of security cooperation

9 Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng, *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace*, pp. 69-74.

10 ASEAN Regional Forum, "Chairman's Statement: The First ASEAN Regional Forum."

11 Xinhua News Agency, *China Newsletter*, quoted in Nobuo Terao, "Countries, Ethnicities, Regions and Japan-US Relations in the Asia-Pacific: Centered on the Process of Establishing the ASEAN Regional Forum," p. 8.

between China and ASEAN. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States shifted the primary objective of its global strategy to counter-terrorism and security, which provided an opportunity and a driver for the improvement of Sino-US relations. Contact and cooperation became the mainstream of US policy towards China.¹² In 2002, the report of the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China made an important statement about a “period of strategic opportunities,” explaining that “Looking at the overall international and domestic situations, the first two decades of the twenty-first century is an important period of strategic opportunities for our country that must be firmly grasped to make a difference.”¹³ In terms of the international situation and foreign relations, the report pointed out that “striving for a long-term peaceful international environment and a good neighborhood environment is an achievable goal,” reaffirming the importance of “building friendship and partnership with neighboring countries and strengthening regional cooperation.”¹⁴ In this regard, for twentieth-first century China, seizing strategic opportunities and maintaining a stable neighborhood environment for domestic economic development is the driving force behind China-ASEAN security cooperation, with “building friendship and partnership with neighboring countries” as the guiding principle.

In line with the above-mentioned major policies and principles, China took a series of innovative measures to advance cooperation with ASEAN, marking the “first move” of neighborhood diplomacy. In August 2002, China submitted to the ASEAN Regional Forum a position paper on the new security concept, at the heart of which were mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation. At the end of 2002, China and ASEAN signed a series of important documents, including the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between China and ASEAN, and the Joint Declaration on Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues. The Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea represents a commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes; it is a programmatic document that seeks to build trust and explore cooperation in disputed areas. The Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between China and ASEAN marks the start of the building of a Free Trade Area (FTA). China was the first major country outside the region to propose an overall FTA with ASEAN. In 2003, China became the first major outside power to join the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, and among ASEAN’s dialogue partners, China was also the first to upgrade its dialogue partnership with ASEAN to a strategic partnership. In addition, China was the first nuclear power to express willingness to join the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty. China took the lead in acceding to

12 Yang Jiemian, “The Global Strategy of the United States and China’s ‘Period of Historic Opportunities,’” pp. 11-15.

13 Jiang Zemin, “Build a Moderately Prosperous Society in an All-Round Way and Create a New Situation in Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: Report to the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (November 8, 2002),” p. 19.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, followed by India, Russia and Japan among others, thus helping to elevate the treaty into the basic norm governing ASEAN's relations with East Asian countries. Consequently, signing up to the treaty has become one of the prerequisites for membership of the East Asia Summit. China's efforts paid off, with China being regarded by most Asian countries as "a good neighbor, a constructive partner, a careful listener, and a non-threatening regional power."¹⁵ Politically, the mutual trust and strategic cooperation between China and ASEAN have reached a new level.

From the perspective of ASEAN, China's cooperation has provided ASEAN with strategic opportunities. During the Asian financial crisis, China kept the RMB stable despite pressure to devalue and hence maintained regional financial stability, paving the way for the economic recovery of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. In 2000, at the China-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting, China's then Prime Minister Zhu Rongji put forward the idea of a China-ASEAN FTA, and this was formally proposed at the 2001 meeting as a Chinese initiative. In 2002, the objective of fully completing the construction of the FTA by 2010 was written into the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between ASEAN and China. The strategic significance of the FTA initiative is that China was the first major outside power to propose an action plan for constructing an FTA with ASEAN, a step taken before the Western market economies. This was the first FTA China proposed after its accession to the WTO, with a view to promoting regional stability and development. More importantly, China initiated an "early harvest" plan, taking the lead in opening its market to ASEAN countries and making unilateral concessions with a view to dispelling their doubts.¹⁶ It was indeed challenging for China to open its markets, including its agricultural market, but it was an important opportunity for the ASEAN countries; the then Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, declared it was a strategic opportunity. Thanks to China's opening of its market, ASEAN could not only expand its economic relations with China but also win greater attention from the rest of the world.¹⁷

In terms of security, what made ASEAN nervous was whether China, which commanded growing hard power, would seek regional hegemony and harm ASEAN interests. The South China Sea issue was representative of their concern. ASEAN felt that it was only by establishing rules and imposing institutional constraints on the major powers on security issues could it safeguard regional strategic opportunities and ensure its own sustainable development. In 1998, ASEAN proposed establishing a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea among the relevant parties. To maintain this strategic opportunity, China agreed in principle to negotiations with ASEAN on the Code of Conduct. Following intense communication and coordination, China and ASEAN signed the Declaration on the Conduct

15 David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order," pp. 64-99.

16 Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng, *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace*, pp. 99-100.

17 Luo Jie, "Good Neighbors Make Great Neighborhoods: Interview with Fu Ying, Director-General of the Asia Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the 10+1 and 10+3 Leaders' Meeting," p. 10.

of Parties in the South China Sea in November 2002. The Declaration represented the consensus position of China and ASEAN on the South China Sea issue, with the overall stability of the South China Sea region to be maintained for the next ten years, thus creating favorable conditions for deepening regional integration and for both sides to seize the strategic opportunity and create conditions for development.

Seizing the strategic opportunity, China and ASEAN have maintained the strategic stability of the region by building institutional frameworks for all-round political, security, and economic cooperation. The evolution of the East Asian international order is affected by two interlinked forces: the interaction of major powers, and ASEAN-centered regional institutional cooperation, a regional process in which ASEAN takes the initiative to mobilize, balance, and maintain rapport with the major powers. The strategic cooperation between China and ASEAN has simultaneously promoted the sound development of the two forces, thus playing a positive role in building regional strategic stability and shaping the East Asian peace system.¹⁸

3. *Maintaining regional security*

The 2008 global financial crisis was a turning point in the evolution of the international landscape. In 2009, Obama announced the US pivot to the Asia-Pacific region, thereby demonstrating the shift to the Asia-Pacific of the world's strategic and economic focus. Since then, the international and regional strategic situation for China and ASEAN has undergone profound changes.

As China surpassed Japan to become the world's second largest economy in 2010, the second decade of the 21st century became a pivotal turning point. Issues like the changing international landscape, China's way forward and Chinese diplomacy prompted a heated discussion among policy circles and the academic community at home and abroad. In the international arena, misleading theories and disinformation about China sprang up, such as "Chimerica," the China responsibility theory or Chinese arrogance.¹⁹ In October 2010, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 17th CPC Central Committee adopted the Communist Party Central Committee's Proposal for Formulating the 12th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development, which concluded that "China's development is still in an important period of strategic opportunities," and that seizing and making the most of this important period of strategic opportunities for China's development was a master strategy for coordinating the overall domestic and international situation. The Proposal reiterated that "Development still holds the key to solving all of our problems."²⁰ In its foreign policy section, the Proposal reiterated that we should "adhere to an independent foreign policy

18 Zhai Kun, "A Brief Review of China's Accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia," pp. 36-37; see also Takashi Terada, "Forming an East Asian Community: A Site for Japan-China Power Struggles," pp. 5-17.

19 Wei Ling, "Striving for Achievement in a New Era: China Debates Its Global Role."

20 "Proposals of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Formulating the 12th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development."

of peace and the path of peaceful development,” and “pursue an open strategy of mutual benefit.” Adhering to the path of peaceful development means that China seeks “harmony and development at home and peace and cooperation abroad.” After the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, more importance was attached to the role of neighborhood diplomacy in the overall development and foreign relations landscape. In October 2013, a symposium on diplomatic work with neighboring countries was held, the first of its kind since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. In the same year, China proposed the joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative. ASEAN was prioritized in China’s neighborhood diplomatic work and was recognized as a key area for high-quality joint construction in the Belt and Road Initiative. China proposed building a China-ASEAN community of a shared future and implementing a “2+7 cooperation framework,” affirming that political security and economic development, like two wheels, should run in tandem.²¹ The above analysis suggests that in the new historical conditions, China should in general, while maintaining its assessment of the period of strategic opportunities, place greater emphasis on the interaction and mutual opportunities offered by the international context and China’s development. In terms of the relationship with ASEAN, China has endeavored to promote the building of high-level strategic trust and recognition. As it shifts from economy-led cooperation to the coordination of economic development and political security, China has stepped up its effort to enhance security cooperation with ASEAN.

As far as ASEAN is concerned, the most challenging changes facing ASEAN after 2008 include the intensified competition between China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, the complexity and internationalization of the South China Sea issue, and the deterioration of the regional security situation. The changing situation lessens the space for ASEAN’s coordination and balancing efforts and exposes it to having to choose sides. To handle these challenges, ASEAN first of all took steps to strengthen internal unity, completing the building of the ASEAN community in 2015 ahead of schedule and thus enhancing its ability to interact with the major powers. Second, ASEAN ramped up its institutional capacity-building with the aim of maintaining and strengthening ASEAN centrality in the regional cooperation framework for politics, security, economics and finance. In 2010, the first expanded defense ministers’ meeting was held, and in the same year, the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization took effect. In 2011, ASEAN expanded the East Asia Summit to include the United States and Russia and in 2012, negotiations on a comprehensive regional economic partnership were officially launched. With regard to the South China Sea issue, ASEAN made every effort to mitigate the impact of specific disputes between claimants on the overall stability of the South China Sea region, seeking the highest common interest of all parties and promoting consultation on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. In terms of Sino-US competition, ASEAN countries were concerned about their own security, and

21 Li Keqiang, “Speech at the 17th China-ASEAN (10+1) Leaders’ Meeting.”

were either unwilling to choose sides or were forced into invidious choices.²²

From the perspective of ASEAN, China's rapid development was a major strategic opportunity. China continued to develop cooperation with ASEAN in the fields of trade, investment and tourism, and regional supply chains became increasingly integrated and connected. Although the United States had been ASEAN's main economic partner in the past, today China has not only become the largest economy in the region and ASEAN's largest trading partner but has also fully participated in and been integrated into the ASEAN-led regional process. With the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative and the operations of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, China's interests in the region have further expanded and deepened and its influence has been further strengthened. However, the entire regional architecture is open, signifying that China's growing influence does not mean other countries' influence would be weakened; after all, China's influence is not exclusive. Of late, China has been more active in foreign relations. It has set itself the goal of building the country into a maritime power, aiming to protect its overseas interests and safeguard its legitimate rights and interests in international affairs. At the same time, an increasingly powerful China is committed to shouldering greater international responsibilities and working together with other countries to reform and improve international institutions. The US military presence remains very important for maintaining regional security and stability. Since China and some other countries are in dispute over territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea, and since people of Chinese descent are still a sensitive issue in some Southeast Asian countries' dealings with China, China will not be able to take over America's security role in the foreseeable future. Of course, the United States also still plays an important role in the regional economic system. The global financial system is built upon the US-dominated international currency system, and the Chinese yuan will be unable to replace the US dollar as the world's reserve currency in the short term. But of course, it is virtually impossible for the United States to replace China as the largest regional trading partner in Asia and the source of the global supply chain linking China closely with the ASEAN countries. The ASEAN members are keen to maintain friendly cooperation with China and share in China's growth; they are neither willing nor able to have their relations with China deteriorate, and they do not want to see China-ASEAN relations held hostage by the South China Sea issue or other single issue disputes.²³

Faced with the new regional situation, China and ASEAN have strengthened their political and security cooperation, aiming to preserve regional stability and security and to maintain and continuously create strategic opportunities for sustainable development. Since 2010, China and ASEAN have actively carried out security cooperation within the framework of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). In 2012, the China-ASEAN

22 Lee Hsien Loong, "The Endangered Asian Century: America, China and the Perils of Confrontation."

23 *Ibid.*

Defense Ministers Informal Meeting was launched. The ADMM-Plus “is the highest-level and largest defense and security dialogue and cooperation mechanism in the Asia-Pacific region.”²⁴ In 2011, China and ASEAN adopted the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Declaration of Conduct on the South China Sea; in 2016, the foreign ministers of China and ASEAN countries issued a joint statement on the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea; in 2017, China and ASEAN initiated consultations and negotiations on the text of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea; and in 2018, China and ASEAN jointly issued the China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Vision 2030. In 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out that “China-ASEAN relations have become the most successful and dynamic model of cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region and a vivid example of promoting the building of a community of a shared future for mankind.”²⁵

III. Developmental Peace: The Fundamental Idea of China-ASEAN Security Cooperation

Both China and ASEAN need to develop in a peaceful environment, and view this as an important strategic opportunity. In order to maintain and create more strategic opportunities, the two sides have developed a shared security concept of peace, development and cooperation in their exchanges and interactions. Developmental Peace, a security norm shared by China and ASEAN, is the prerequisite and conceptual basis for the two sides to dispel misgivings and concentrate on cooperation. Since the 1980s, an export substitution strategy and pragmatic foreign policy, coupled with the context of a free and open international economic system, have enabled the major ASEAN countries and China to achieve economic growth while maintaining regional stability. Since then, East Asia has entered a period of “Long Peace,” free of large-scale regional conflicts. Developmental peace has three layers of meaning: the first is the path of peaceful development; the second is a regional integration strategy that prioritizes economic development and economic cooperation; and the third is a development security concept that promotes the positive interaction of development and security.

There are two pathways for developmental peace: actors may choose to boost their strength in a peaceful way or to achieve an enduring peace through economic development and advancing cooperation through international interactions. ASEAN and China have respectively formed and proposed guiding principles and codes of conduct to govern security cooperation activities such as the ASEAN Way, cooperative security, the new security concept and the Asian security concept. These norms, all of which emphasize the maintenance of cooperation, include three specific principles of action—non-interference; being attentive to

24 Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, “China-ASEAN Security Cooperation: Consensus Leads to Action and Action Promotes Security.”

25 Xi Jinping, “Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the 17th China-ASEAN Expo and Business and Investment Summit.”

each other's concerns and comfort levels; and maintaining security through cooperation, with special stress on the fact that advancing cooperation is of profound significance in building lasting security.

1. The ASEAN Way and cooperative security

The ASEAN Way was formulated in the course of building the ASEAN Security Community. It involves the principles of non-interference, peaceful settlement of disputes, consultation and consensus-building and non-formal approaches. With the evolution of ASEAN-centered East Asian regional cooperation, the ASEAN Way has become the basic norm for building an East Asian community and for broader Asia-Pacific security cooperation.²⁶

ASEAN's norms on security cooperation are a combination of international norms and indigenous practice. The ASEAN Way's principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and peaceful settlement of disputes constitute the basic principles of the Westphalian system. ASEAN itself was conceived during the conflict between Indonesia and Malaysia and was established by five countries seeking to prevent wars and resolve conflicts. In 1969, ASEAN successfully prevented the escalation of the conflict in Sabah through diplomacy, exerting pressure, cutting off trade, etc. This represented an important milestone in resolving the conflict in the ASEAN Way. The 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia for the first time provides a clear statement of the consensus of ASEAN member states on security cooperation. Its key points include mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, peaceful settlement of disputes and non-use of force. These principles have become the guiding norms for the handling of relations among ASEAN member states. Thereafter, with the diffusion of institutionalized cooperation in East Asia and the consequent signing of the treaty by many major powers outside the region, these also became the basic principles for East Asian countries' interaction.

What distinguishes the ASEAN Way from other multilateral principles is its informal decision-making process based on consultation and consensus. This preference stems from ASEAN countries' concept of peace and their understanding of how to maintain peace and cooperation. The ASEAN member states hold that to achieve true peace, they must devote themselves to the building of confidence, trust, predictability, goodwill and friendship; strengthen national resilience; and build a warm and efficient relationship network.²⁷ As ASEAN countries hold different positions and views, informality, consultation and consensus building serve to reduce the use of coercive measures, effectively lessening the possibility of conflict and confrontation. Based as it is on equality, tolerance and understanding, consensus building allows for diverse interests, enabling the parties to seek the greatest degree of

26 Amitav Acharya, "Ideas, Identity, and Institution-building: From the 'ASEAN Way' to the 'Asia-Pacific Way?'" , pp. 319-346; *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (2nd ed.), Chapter 2.

27 Noordin Sopiee, "ASEAN towards 2020: Strategic Goals and Critical Pathways."

consensus and to cultivate a spirit of cooperation.

Cooperative security grows out of ASEAN's localization of the international norms of common security, which, while highlighting cooperation, acknowledge the fundamental role of non-interference in the normative regional system. Cooperative security is the dominant norm for the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asian security cooperation. In the 1980s, as the Cold War entered its final stage, several major powers in the Asia-Pacific region put forward the idea of building regional multilateral security cooperation based on Europe's common security norms, calling for an institution closely modeled after the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). ASEAN, adhering to the principle of sovereignty and the basic norms of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, reconstructed the common security concept, reframing it as cooperative security. Cooperative security retained the principle of inclusiveness and the rejection of deterrence-based security systems, but rejected the enforceable legal measures of security cooperation found in the CSCE process, as well as the link established by the CSCE between domestic politics and regional security. ASEAN recognized that with the end of the Cold War and the resolution of the Cambodian conflict, it needed to find a new focus to maintain the cohesion of the organization and enhance and strengthen its role in the Asia-Pacific region. However, the construction of regional collective security had to be achieved through consultation and dialogue as well as consensus building and cooperation. If regional collective security were to be based on enforceable legal measures and the linkage of domestic politics and regional security, the lack of trust expressed in such cooperation would not only be unable to guarantee the interests of small countries, but could also leave domestic politics vulnerable to external interference. With these considerations in mind, ASEAN sought to promote cooperative security norms through a "Second Track," and voiced the hope that the region could establish a forum to conduct security dialogues.²⁸ In 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum was established, making it an important institutional tool for the diffusion of ASEAN's security norms and security cooperation agenda to the entire Asia-Pacific region. Regional powers, including China and the United States, have joined the forum. At its first meeting, the ASEAN Regional Forum identified the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia as the norm governing member states' relations, emphasizing non-interference and peaceful settlement of disputes. The Forum was geared toward confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and political and security cooperation. Unlike the CSCE, the ASEAN Regional Forum strengthened the centrality of ASEAN and adhered to the ASEAN Way of voluntary compliance and consensus building.

2. The new security concept and the Asian security concept

In August 2002, China submitted a position paper on the new security concept to the ASEAN Regional Forum. The essence of the new security concept, featuring mutual trust,

28 Amitav Acharya, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," pp. 239-275; *Whose Ideas Matter? Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism*, Chapter 5.

mutual benefit, equality and cooperation, is to go beyond the scope of unilateral security and seek common security through mutually beneficial cooperation. It is based on an inclusive assessment of the international situation, the nature of the threats, and ways to respond to them. China maintained that after the Cold War, as the security situation improved, economic development had become a global trend. The traditional notion of security had expanded its scope to include not only political and military security, but also economic, technological and cultural security, among others. Accelerated globalization had led to the deepening of interdependence among all countries that, facing increasing common security issues, also enjoyed shared security benefits. These realities suggested that cooperation was pivotal in responding to increasing security threats and strengthening common security. The new security concept turned to the following basic principles for the construction of international security: 1) the Charter of the United Nations, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and other internationally recognized norms of international relations; 2) the peaceful settlement of territorial, border and other disputes through negotiations; 3) mutual benefits and shared development; 4) a greater focus on non-traditional security threats such as terrorism and transnational crime; 5) preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and refraining from participating in an arms race. This new security concept is a new security philosophy to be jointly cultivated by the international community, affirming “building trust through dialogue and promoting security through cooperation.” China posits that: 1) security cooperation should be open and inclusive, and should promote exchanges between countries with different development models and development approaches; 2) cooperation should be flexible and have a variety of formats, including highly institutionalized and binding multilateral security mechanisms, multilateral and bilateral security dialogues and consultations aimed at enhancing exchanges and fostering trust, and academic dialogues; 3) effective security should also be maintained by strengthening economic cooperation and enhancing common economic interests.²⁹ Both the new security concept and ASEAN’s cooperative security concept lay emphasis on adhering to sovereign equality and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states; the maintenance of peace through equal consultation and negotiation in a cooperative manner; achieving collective security through building trust; and cooperation as benefiting all participants.

The Asian security concept, a concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, has gradually taken shape in the course of China’s participation in regional cooperation. It is a Chinese approach to resolving security dilemmas and maintaining regional security in the new era. To achieve the two centennial goals, China has placed additional emphasis on neighborhood diplomacy, as this has a crucial role to play in the overall development of the country and the overall diplomatic situation. The 2013 Conference on the Diplomatic Work with Neighboring Countries, the Belt and Road Initiative and the

29 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Position Paper on the New Security Concept.”

concept of a community of a shared future for mankind all serve as backdrops to China's diplomatic focus, demonstrating that Southeast Asia and ASEAN are the priority of China's neighborhood diplomacy. In 2014, China proposed the Asian security concept on the basis of the new security concept. This included two important and innovative ideas: first, emphasizing the important role of regional cooperation in promoting the common security of countries in the region, and working towards building an Asian community with a shared future; second, adding the concept of sustainable security, which emphasizes that development and security complement and depend on each other—the greater the emphasis placed on development, the more likely it is that peace will be maintained and cooperation promoted.³⁰ On regional security cooperation, the Asian security concept puts forward such propositions as equal participation, joint maintenance and accommodation of differences, and in terms of political security, it lays special emphasis on the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries; respecting each country's independent choice of development path; striving to satisfy the legitimate security interests and concerns of all parties; opposing any country's attempt to monopolize regional security affairs; and opposing military alliances targeting a third party. On measures to build security, the Asian security concept advocates enhancing strategic mutual trust through dialogue and communication; seeking common ground while reserving differences with a view to enhancing common interests and cultivating the habit of cooperation; and achieving peace and security through expanding cooperation. In terms of sustainable security, it stresses the fundamental significance of economic development for achieving lasting security. For Asian countries, "development represents the best means to security." Therefore, economic development cooperation is inherent to regional security cooperation: only through the benign interaction of economic cooperation and security cooperation can sustainable security be achieved.

IV. Sustainable Security: An Important Practice of China-ASEAN Security Cooperation

The practice of China-ASEAN security cooperation is characterized by multiple elements, multiple layers and multiple dimensions, presenting a state of comprehensive development. Its goal is to enhance strategic trust, ensure regional stability, and maintain the momentum of development. By "multiple elements" we mean the many participants and diverse models of cooperation, including intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation, the China-ASEAN (10+1) cooperation mechanism, inter-departmental cooperation, and cooperation at the local level in various countries, as well as exchanges and dialogues in academic circles and non-governmental organizations. "Multiple layers" refers to overlapping cooperation frameworks. As in other fields, such as the overlap of cooperation mechanisms in East Asia, China-ASEAN security cooperation is carried forward concurrently under multiple frameworks, such as the China-ASEAN Defense Ministers Informal Meeting, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the

30 Wei Ling, "Developmental Peace in East Asia and Its Implications for the Indo-Pacific," pp. 189-209.

ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus, etc. "Multiple dimensions" refers to the bilateral, mini-multilateral and multilateral security cooperation conducted at different levels and dimensions.

1. Security mechanisms and trust building

The institutionalization of China-ASEAN security cooperation can be observed from China's accession to the ASEAN Regional Forum and the China-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting. As mentioned above, with regard to the guiding norms for security cooperation and collective security, both China and ASEAN lay emphasis on non-interference, dialogue and consultation, and the enhancement of mutual trust. Therefore, the goal of constructing such arrangements is not aimed at treaty-based and highly institutionalized China-ASEAN security cooperation, but rather at building a platform for dialogue, consultation and cooperation. The focus is on enhancing trust, coordinating strategic interests, building a mutually beneficial partnership, maintaining regional stability and fostering cooperation in the strategic environment. This is markedly different from the institutionalized cooperation based on mandatory standards and binding rules that has been enshrined by the western tradition in international relations theory and practice.

2. Formulating rules and strategic stability

The second important aspect of China-ASEAN security cooperation is to address hotspot issues and maintain strategic regional stability by establishing rules of conduct. As far as the overall regional security situation is concerned, peace and stability in the South China Sea are of strategic importance to both sides. From the proposing of "shelving disputes and pursuing joint development" to the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and subsequent negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, China and ASEAN have embarked on a path to establishing behavioral rules and strategic regional stability by conducting dialogue and cooperation on the South China Sea issue.

3. Practical cooperation and sustainable security

Cooperation in the field of non-traditional security issues is an important aspect of China-ASEAN security cooperation. China and ASEAN are committed to achieving sustainable regional security and sustainable development, embodying a pragmatic spirit and the concept of cooperative security. During the 2002 China-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting, China launched China's Position Paper on Enhanced Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues and issued together with ASEAN the Joint Declaration of ASEAN and China on Cooperation in the Field of Non-traditional Security Issues. The non-traditional security issues identified in these two documents as cooperation priorities include trafficking in illegal drugs, people smuggling, piracy, terrorism, arms smuggling, money laundering, international economic crime and cyber crime. To address such non-traditional issues, the documents propose that emphasis should be given to the following points: enhancing coordination; addressing issues through the integrated use of a variety of means and forms and in a step-by-step manner; removing the root causes of such problems with the aim of preventing their

emergence and spread; observing the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference in each other's internal affairs; and seeking security through mutual trust and enhancing cooperation through mutual benefit.³¹ In 2004 and 2009, China and ASEAN signed the Memorandum of Understanding between the Governments of the Member Nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues, and in 2011 the Participants signed the Action Plan (2011-2014) for the implementation of the Memorandum. In 2017, China released the white paper China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation, which systematically introduced China's concepts, propositions and practice with regard to participating in regional security cooperation, and in the same year China and ASEAN renewed the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Non-Security Issues.³²

The fields of common interest for cooperation identified in the memorandum of understanding include information exchange, personnel exchanges and training, law enforcement cooperation, and other activities such as research, as agreed upon by the participants. In addition, China supports the ASEAN Regional Forum in its efforts to strengthen pragmatic cooperation in non-traditional security fields such as peacekeeping, preventive diplomacy, disaster management, maritime security and cyber security. China is among the member states which have undertaken the highest number of cooperation projects.³³ In terms of China-ASEAN non-traditional security cooperation, cooperation in law enforcement and maritime security are of special importance for achieving a benign interaction between security and development, proving pivotal in maintaining regional sustainable security and development.

31 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Position Paper on Enhanced Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues"; "Joint Declaration of ASEAN and China on Cooperation in the Field of Non-traditional Security Issues."

32 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "Memorandum of Understanding between the Governments of the Member Countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in the Field of Non-traditional Security Issues"; Governments of the Member Countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Government of the People's Republic of China, "2009 Memorandum of Understanding between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in the Field of Non-traditional Security Issues," signed in Siem Reap, Cambodia, November 18, 2009; Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "Plan of Action for the Memorandum of Understanding between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues," Bali, Indonesia, October 12, 2011; Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Government of the People's Republic of China, "2017 Memorandum of Understanding between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in the Field of Non-traditional Security Issues," adopted in Manila, the Philippines, September 21, 2017; The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation."

33 ASEAN Regional Forum, *Annual Security Outlook 2020*.

V. Concluding Remarks

This article combs through and reviews the evolution, core concepts and major practices of China-ASEAN security cooperation with the aim of answering the question of why, in the first place, China and ASEAN entered into security cooperation; whether they have hammered out common concepts and norms; and whether cooperation has made significant headway.

The dialogue relationship and security cooperation between China and ASEAN started following the end of the Cold War. The driving force behind China-ASEAN cooperation was the maintenance of regional political and strategic stability and the seizing of strategic opportunities and creation of a benign external environment for the participants' economic growth amid a changing international landscape cooperation in which the old was giving way to the new and a strategic vacuum was emerging in the East Asian region. Since then, the strengthening of their consensus on strategic opportunities has enabled the two sides to survive such adverse situations such as the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the 2008 global financial crisis, the strained situation in the South China Sea and intensified competition among major powers. Both sides are committed to maintaining and deepening cooperation with a view to maintaining regional stability and friendly relations, thereby creating strategic opportunities that were conducive to further development. These opportunities were seized by the two sides after taking stock of the international situation in the wake of the Cold War, however, to a much greater extent, they were created through their all-round cooperation in the political, security, economic, financial, social and cultural fields. The past thirty years have witnessed impressive progress in confidence building, institution-building, formulating rules and practical cooperation. This has led to enhanced strategic trust and strengthened strategic regional stability, which has proved of great importance in promoting sustainable regional security and development.

A systematic in-depth study of China-ASEAN security cooperation allows us to see the big picture without the daily minutiae and take a long view of the whole scene, grasping the developmental pulse and direction, gaining a clearer understanding of each other's major concerns, core interests and strategic positioning, and firmly upholding the strategic aims of building a stronger ASEAN community and a closer China-ASEAN community with a shared future.

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