The International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220513

Analysis of the Necessity of Cooperation Between China and ASEAN in the Epidemic Era

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Abstract: The dialogue process between China and ASEAN was officially launched in 1991. Over the past three decades, the bilateral relations between them have made remarkable achievements and become a model of cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, China and ASEAN have developed closer ties and made great progress in cooperation in political security, economic trade, health security and other fields. Today, ASEAN has surpassed the United States and the European Union to become China's largest trading partner. This paper discusses the necessity of cooperation between China and ASEAN in the post-epidemic era. For China, ASEAN is an important strategic pivot to safeguard its neighborhood security. China has always followed an ASEAN-centric strategy, and its vaccine diplomacy during the pandemic has been very effective, which has boosted its relations with ASEAN. For ASEAN, its internal vulnerability has forced it to rely on external powers, with China being one of its preferred powers because of its geographical location and close economic ties. As to global order, the US pivot to Asia and the more serious friction between China and the US during the pandemic era make it necessary for China and ASEAN to work together to maintain the unity of the Asian region.

Keywords: ASEAN, China-ASEAN cooperation, epidemic era

1. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded on August 8, 1967, in Bangkok, Thailand, with its secretariat in Jakarta, Indonesia. As of 2020, ASEAN has 10 member countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam.

The diplomatic history between China and ASEAN countries can be traced back to the early days of the People's Republic of China. In 1954, the Chinese delegation attended the Geneva Conference, which settled the Indochina question, and Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia gained national independence. This is an essential milestone in the history of Chinese diplomacy toward the three countries. After the Bandung Conference in 1955, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence signed by China and Myanmar had an irreplaceable impact on the liberation of Asian and African nations. By the early 1990s, the Vietnam-Cambodia border conflict was resolved, and an era of peace and stability within ASEAN began [1].

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Over the past two decades, China and ASEAN have built a strong partnership, with harmonious political relations and flourishing economic, trade, and cultural cooperation, laying a solid foundation for establishing a China-ASEAN community of destiny [2]. The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 was the most severe global public health event since World War II, disrupting people's ordinary lives, hampering economic development, and even affecting the world order. China was the first country hit by the outbreak. Due to their geographical proximity to China, ASEAN countries are one of the most vulnerable regions to be affected by the outbreak, apart from China. After the outbreak, ASEAN was the first inter-regional international organization to engage in a dialogue with China on cooperation in preventing and controlling the epidemic.

At present, the political relations between China and ASEAN are very harmonious. The Action Plan for implementing the Joint Declaration on China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership sets out the vision for strengthening mutually beneficial cooperation and good-neighborly relations between China and ASEAN in 2021-2025 [3]. On the economic front, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) signed in 2022 is on a firmer footing. On security, China has integrated biosecurity into its national security system, including public health security. ASEAN, China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (10+3) have agreed to work closely with the World Health Organization and the international community [4].

This paper analyzes why cooperation between China and ASEAN during the epidemic is necessary. It is divided into three parts: the perspective of China, the perspective of ASEAN, and the perspective of international order.

2. Perspective of China

China and ASEAN have indeed made some achievements in cooperation during the epidemic, and the cooperation between the two countries must continue. Next, the author will discuss the necessity in detail from three perspectives: China, ASEAN, and the world order.

2.1. China's Neighborhood Strategy

In recent years, China has been creating a "strategic pivot" to ensure security in its neighborhood. A "strategic pivot" is a country or region that can support a country in achieving its own goals. Although China's long-standing strategy of "hiding its light" has provided it with a favorable neighborhood environment, concerns about China's rapid rise have never been wholly dispelled. After the outbreak of COVID-19, China has been questioned more than ever.

There are three main reasons for China to regard ASEAN as an essential "strategic pivot". Firstly, the return of the US to the Asia-Pacific and the troubled strategic relationship between China and the US have forced China to create a strategic pivot. ASEAN has then become one of China's preferred regions. Besides, China has Russia and Pakistan as pivot points in the north and southwest but not yet in East Asia. The ten ASEAN countries are geographically close to China and belong to the same East Asian region. Jin Xu points out that countries that do not have major territorial conflicts with China and have harmonious relations can become strategic pivot points, including Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, all of which are ASEAN members [5]. Thirdly, many Chinese and overseas Chinese are in ASEAN countries, which makes them have natural blood and cultural affinity with China.

2.2. China's Vaccine Diplomacy

A successful vaccine development gives a country the confidence to develop effective follow-up policies and encourages the private sector to resume production as soon as possible. During the epidemic, China's primary way of creating a strategic pivot point in its neighborhood was to provide

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supplies and medical assistance to other countries and regions. ASEAN is one of the largest regions where China provides vaccine assistance. In contrast to the 'domestic first' approach to vaccine production and distribution in Western countries, China is actively providing vaccine assistance to other countries while stabilizing the outbreak at home, as it has not only the core vaccine technology but also a large pool of raw materials and human resources. Following the introduction of the Chinese vaccine, Indonesia's outbreak composite improved by 2%. in 2020, Cambodia received 600,000 Chinese vaccines, Laos 300,000, Thailand 200,000, and the Philippines 600,000. By June 2021, Vietnam, which had long refused to receive the Sinovac vaccine, finally accepted Chinese aid.

ASEAN was able to resume economic production as soon as the epidemic situation improved [6]. It can be argued that "vaccine diplomacy" has been very effective in Southeast Asia, especially in 2020 and 2021, and this will positively impact China's medium- to long-term neighborhood strategy. In the post-pandemic era, vaccines will be universal, and a more complete medical and health system will be built. China's vaccine assistance has proved that ASEAN countries need China's help in this area and need better economic and social cooperation with China to cope with the negative impact of the epidemic and jointly fight the epidemic.

2.3. China's ASEAN-Centric Strategy

Since the foundation of the ASEAN-Centric Strategy, China has been actively dealing with its relations with international organizations. Over time, the approach has changed from reactive to proactive, from a one-way development to a bilateral one. This approach also applies to relations with ASEAN. In the early years of China's existence, due to political instability and economic backwardness, China was negatively identified with itself. It had been receiving assistance unilaterally from international organizations, let alone establishing diplomatic relations with a regional organization like ASEAN. Since 1978, however, China's rise and increase in total national power have shifted its international identity to a positive one, with active participation in the international community and social institutions [7,8].

In its bilateral interactions with ASEAN, China has always insisted on the centrality of ASEAN. The understanding of equality usually differs when the power gap between the two cooperating parties is too significant. Smaller countries are more susceptible to bilateral interactions, are more concerned with their gains and losses in the relationship, and often need to deal with changes in the relationship. ASEAN is weaker compared to China and therefore needs more assurances from China that it will respect ASEAN's internal identity, interests, and space for survival. In its bilateral interactions with ASEAN, China has always respected and followed ASEAN's way of maintaining its regional institutional framework, recognizing its role as a regional agenda-setter, and following its internal consensus decision-making process [9]. Therefore, it is necessary and promising for their cooperation to develop in a positive direction.

3. Perspective of ASEAN

3.1. ASEAN's Internal Problems

Many problems within ASEAN have contributed to a lack of confidence among member states in ASEAN as a problem-solving unit. One of the most apparent problems within ASEAN is the unequal economic development of its member states. Due to geographical constraints, Laos is the slowest developing member state, with a GDP per capita of only US$1,840.50 in 2019, less than 1/30th of Singapore's wealthiest member state. This massive gap between the rich and poor has led to relatively weak member-state relations. According to trade statistics published on the official ASEAN website, trade between ASEAN member states has accounted for just under 25% of total trade over the past five years and shows no sign of rising. Compared to the EU and NAFTA regions, the ratio is relatively

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low. The spread of the new crown epidemic and poor health care by 2020 is further contributing to slow economic growth, difficult trade recovery, and cross-border unemployment [10]. Even Singapore, the leading economy, has seen its production levels decline, and the overall performance of the ASEAN economy is sluggish. This made ASEAN have to find support from external powers.

3.2. ASEAN's Economic Tie with China

In the post-pandemic era, ASEAN must act more carefully to ensure that its top priority - being at the center of regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region can be achieved [11]. China and the United States are ASEAN's two central external dependents. Not only because of the geographical proximity. China's economy is very attractive to ASEAN. ASEAN's external markets are mainly concentrated in East Asia, North America, and Europe. However, the current situation of the epidemic in Europe and the United States is not optimistic. This year's conflict between Russia and Ukraine has led to soaring inflation rates in Europe and the United States and increased economic uncertainty in Europe. The weakness of Western economies has exposed ASEAN countries to excess capacity during the pandemic, which has led to increased debt risk in the domestic corporate sector of ASEAN [12].

In addition, the economic chain between China and ASEAN is closely linked. With its growing role in global investment, coupled with its domestic service sector expansion, China plays a crucial role in global value chains. One study suggests that without other policy interventions, China's impact on world aggregate consumption and production during COVID-19 will be more significant than during SARS and that this impact is positively correlated with the economic impact on ASEAN [13]. Figure 1 reflects the changes in real GDP of China and the six ASEAN countries over the years. It is clear that although the lines fluctuate slightly, the overall trend is similar. The vertical line represents the date of first COVID-19 case. The outbreak of COVID-19 caused China's GDP to fall sharply in 2020, and other member countries also showed a downward trend.

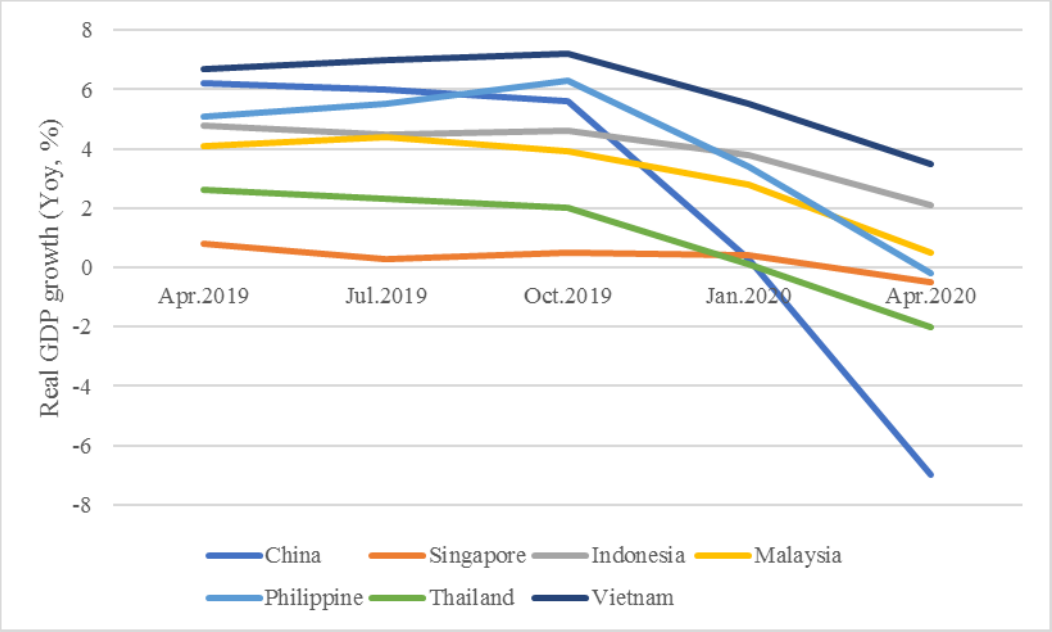


Figure 1: Change of the GDP of China and ASEAN countries (Photo credit: Original) [13].

Lastly, China has become an essential source of value-added goods and services for ASEAN, and Chinese inputs are increasingly crucial for ASEAN exports of consumer goods and services [13]. Such close economic ties make it impossible for China and ASEAN to abandon cooperation. In particular, the epidemic has led to a redistribution of resources, severely affecting employment,

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import and export trade, tourism, etc. Neither side is immune. They have therefore chosen the right diplomatic strategy to enhance their cooperation and mutual assistance.

3.3. Equidistant Diplomacy

ASEAN has a great need to cooperate with China. However, it cannot completely abandon the support of the United States, so ASEAN has implemented a very flexible policy of "equidistant diplomacy" between the two great powers. Isometric means equidistant, in other words, not too far or too close to one side. ASEAN maintains good relations with China but does not over-rely on the Chinese government. For example, from the early days of the outbreak, ASEAN has avoided blaming China for the virus problems as some Western countries have done and instead has shown willingness to cooperate with China. At the November 2020 summit, ASEAN expressed support for various Chinese public sector projects and welcomed its medical supplies and equipment to Southeast Asia. It also expressed appreciation and gratitude for China's commitment to prioritizing COVID-19 vaccines for Southeast Asia [11].

4. Perspective of International Order

East Asia is the base of competition between China and the United States and the region where the structural contradictions between the two countries are most prominent. The competition between the old and rising powers at the global level is focused on the future ownership of the dominant power in East Asia. China's efforts to build regional economic cooperation in East Asia have been undermined by the US strategy to return to Asia. The US has used TPP to dismantle the "10+X" framework for East Asia [5].

Unlike the SRAS outbreak in 2003, the current COVID-19 has gone beyond health issues to trigger a series of diplomatic conflicts between the US and China, leading some experts to describe relations between the two countries as a "new Cold War" [11]. The US wants to turn ASEAN countries into bastions of Western values to counter China politically, economically, and financially. There is still an anti-China sentiment in some ASEAN members due to ideological differences, particularly on social media. This year, for example, many Thai celebrities took to Twitter to boycott China's Sinovac vaccines. This is why some scholars say that the ability of the United States to dismantle and destroy a country and multilateral organizations is significantly higher than that of bilateral relations between countries [5]. Therefore, while actively maintaining multilateral relations with ASEAN, China must identify several key national priorities among the ten countries.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, cooperation between China and ASEAN in the post-epidemic era is necessary. From China's perspective, ASEAN is an essential strategic pivot for China and is conducive to maintaining China's neighborhood security. From ASEAN's perspective, China's vaccine diplomacy can also ensure that the economies of China and ASEAN recover and develop quickly after being hit by the epidemic. The cooperation with China will help it address the negative impact of its internal instability and minimize the epidemic's impact. ASEAN countries have chosen the equidistant foreign policy generally to counter the unstable international situation since the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which confirms the rational attitude towards cooperation with China and the United States. In terms of world order, the United States returns to Asia. It attempts to turn East Asia into an "Asia-Pacific" order, which is detrimental to the sovereignty and interests of East Asian countries. Therefore, China and ASEAN must insist on an Asian approach to problem-solving, to partner but not to ally, and to work together to maintain the security of the East Asian region and achieve a win-win situation.

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