

AVI COMMENTARY

Cambodia | 30 December 2022

China's Neighbourhood Diplomacy in the Volatile World: Perspectives from Cambodia and ASEAN

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In recent years, the world has faced mounting pressures and challenges posed by the persistence and accentuation of regional tensions such as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis, geopolitical rivalry between superpowers, zero-sum power competition, and non-traditional security threats. They have created risks threatening states' security, national development, and people's livelihoods.

To address these issues and strengthen peace, security and sustainable development, China has actively and consistently promoted her neighbourhood diplomacy, guided by the non-interference principle and constructive engagement spirit. The neighbourhood diplomacy is crucial for resolving conflicts and promoting peace and development with her neighbouring countries.

Based on neighbourhood diplomacy, China has settled the outstanding differences, enhanced mutual trust, and deepened mutually beneficial cooperation with her neighbouring countries and the world. The aim is to create an amicable, secure, and prosperous neighbourhood under the principle of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness.

Neighbourhood diplomacy, spearheaded by Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping, has become a cornerstone of China's foreign policy in promoting regional peace, cooperation, and development, particularly through her mega project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the building of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind. They have greatly contributed to sharing Chinese prosperity, harmony, and peaceful development with the international community.

Moreover, China's vision of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind helps strengthen the international system, for it focuses on the ultimate interest of humanity. In this community, the key features are inclusiveness, openness, and green development. Indeed, China's generous contribution to the global fight against COVID-19, especially under the Health Silk Road, manifests such a noble goal. Instead of politicising Coronavirus and promoting vaccine nationalism, Chinese leaders have embraced multilateral mechanisms and considered "COVID-19 vaccines as global public goods". As a result, projects and programmes under the Health Silk Road have saved millions of lives across the globe.

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China's neighbourhood diplomacy is imperative for realising the Community of Shared Future for Mankind. It is inclusive as it covers more than sixty countries. Their geographic, demographic, economic, social, and cultural diversity is huge, spanning from New Zealand to Afghanistan and from Mongolia to Cambodia. Indeed, the diplomacy covers all areas of cooperation and uses organisations to facilitate development aid to allow the diplomacy to direct its actions effectively.

China's Neighbourhood Diplomacy and ASEAN

ASEAN-China relations testify to the strong adherence to and promotion of neighbourhood diplomacy. Last year, the two parties announced the upgrade of their strategic partnership to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, setting a new stage of more extensive cooperation across multiple pillars and a new blueprint for the relations.

China and ASEAN have worked closely for deeper engagement and cooperation. The two sides recognise the importance of deepening regional connectivity by enhancing links and synergies between the Master Plan of ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and the BRI. China has also supported ASEAN's common endeavours to realise the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the implementation of the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plans. In addition, the two sides have promoted the implementation of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) and ASEAN-China Plan of Action 2016–2020, particularly in areas such as political-security cooperation, trade, transport, tourism, ICT, and smart cities.

The tremendous progress of cooperation between China and ASEAN speaks for itself. For instance, the two-way trade of USD 878.2 billion between China and ASEAN in 2021, with a growth rate of 28.1 per cent, enables the two parties to remain each other's largest trading partner. In addition, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which came into force on 1 January 2022, will become another important mechanism to advance economic cooperation between the two parties.

In the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, China and ASEAN have stressed the importance of continued mutual assistance and collaboration on scientific research, development, and production of vaccines and medicines that are safe, efficient, affordable, and accessible to all. China has played a leading role in offering timely assistance to ASEAN countries with medicines, medical equipment, medical experts and, importantly, humanitarian aid to join hands with countries in the region to fight against this deadly disease.

China has also actively contributed to social and economic development and institutional improvement of countries in the Mekong region under the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC). The cooperation projects, supported by the MLC Special Fund, have thus far produced many tangible benefits in enhancing the livelihoods and well-being of people and sustainable development in the region. Furthermore, countries in the Mekong region will benefit from the new International Land-Sea Trade Corridor that connects, by road and railway, from the city of Chongqing through the Mekong sub-region to ASEAN member countries. This corridor will link to Pakistan, the Indian Ocean, and Central Asia and continue towards Europe.

China's Neighbourhood Diplomacy and Cambodia

The bilateral relationship between China and Cambodia has grown from strength to strength. The bond of friendship between the two countries has stood the test of time. Cambodia and China are iron-clad friends and close development partners. Their friendship has become a role model in international relations between a small state and a great power. The two countries have enjoyed growing excellent bilateral ties and close cooperation built upon the spirit of mutual respect, mutual understanding, mutual trust, and mutual interest. The historical and cultural connections, particularly leader-to-leader personal ties at all levels, underpin this strong tie, leading to the establishment of the Cambodia-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Cooperation in 2010. The two countries uphold open and constructive dialogue and promote bilateral cooperation for peace, harmony, and prosperity at party-to-party, state-to-state, and people-to-people levels.

The trade and investment activities with China have thus far provided tangible benefits to Cambodia's national development. The strong economic cooperation between Cambodia and China, particularly through the Cambodia-China Free Trade Agreement (CCFTA), has contributed significantly to further promoting Cambodia's agriculture, agro-industry, and industrial sectors.

It is also worth mentioning that during Premier Li Keqiang's official visit to Cambodia, the Chinese leader and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen witnessed the signing of more than ten bilateral cooperation documents, covering agriculture, infrastructure, education, traditional Chinese medicine, customs, science and technology, climate change response, and other fields. In addition, both leaders attended the inauguration ceremony of the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway – a real tangible outcome of the Chinese investment – and the handover ceremony of supporting-livelihood projects.

Cambodia was the first country to sign the Action Plan on Building a Community of Shared Future on 28 April 2019, covering multiple cooperation areas, including foreign affairs, multilateral cooperation, political parties, legislative and political consultative bodies, defence and security, law enforcement, trade and investment, production capacity, transport infrastructure, financial cooperation, water resource management, ICT, science, technology and innovation, and people-to-people ties.

Way Forward for China's Neighbourhood Diplomacy

As a way forward for deepening bilateral cooperation and building the Cambodia-China Community of Shared Future, people must be the core of this community building. Their involvements are relatively significant in achieving the objective. Thus, promoting public awareness of the concept using both media and public forums are crucial. In addition, it is vital to focus more on human capital development and skills development so that societies will become more competitive and resilient.

Moreover, China should continue to deepen her strategic trust and interests with the neighbouring countries and the world to advance the building of a community of shared future with the international community to create a fair, equitable, and just global order based on the spirit of openness, inclusiveness, mutual respect, and love for the earth. China should also continue to work closely with all relevant parties and stakeholders to further broaden and

deepen her cooperation for peace, stability, and economic development through her global and regional multilateral initiatives, including the BRI, the Health Silk Road (HSR), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC).

Besides, it is vital to further uphold multilateral cooperation frameworks to enhance cross-border cooperation and address global issues amid the uncertainty and danger facing the world. In this connection, multilateralism is also the key to the post-COVID-19 recovery because it promotes peace, stability, openness, diversity and win-win cooperation.

It is worth noting that the success of China's initiatives is the success for humankind. BRI's success story in Cambodia will further promote the Cambodia-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Its success will serve as a role model of the modern relationship between a great power and a small state based on the principles of equal sovereignty, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation. Cambodia's success will provide a success story for both the BRI and China's vision of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind.

This article was adapted from the author's Keynote Address at the 12th Symposium on "China's Neighbourhood Diplomacy in the Volatile World: Peace, Cooperation, and Development", organised by Fudan University on 02 December 2022 via videoconference.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.