

Sino-ASEAN Cooperation: Impact on Peace & Stability of the Southeast Asian Region

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the impact of China and ASEAN relations on the peace and stability of the Southeast Asian region. Further, this study addresses the important question of the impact of China-ASEAN cooperation on the peace and stability of the region. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the spillover effect of the Sino-ASEAN cooperation on the peace and security of the Southeast Asian region. In the preceding paragraphs, the paper argues that China and ASEAN have established closer cooperation for their respective economic and strategic interests. China and ASEAN have become interdependent in the pursuit of their interests. The interdependence between China and ASEAN has resulted in cooperation, which has paved the way for a peaceful environment in the region. Thus, the Sino-ASEAN relationship has become a source of peace and stability in the region. Both parties are carefully handling their bilateral issues as they are well aware about the significance of peace and stability for the smooth economic development. This paper is based on the data collected for the doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan.

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INTRODUCTION

China and the states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have enjoyed very close and cordial relations for a very long time. Their relations are marked by mutual trust and interdependence based on economic and strategic interests. Despite many ups and downs, their bilateral cooperation in various fields has reached an unprecedented level. China has improved its participation in the East Asian region to boost the regional economic cooperation and develop its global image as a powerful country in the world. Whereas, countries of South East Asia are inspired by the peaceful emergence of China as an economic power. They are keen to benefit from the economic progress of China and to learn some lessons for their own economic development. Therefore, the states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) decided to make stronger bilateral cooperation with China under the acknowledgement of the increasing role of China as a major and immediate source of economic development in the region. It is argued by scholars that Sino-ASEAN cooperation has contributed to peace, prosperity, and integration in the Southeast Asian region (Azizi, 2025; Bi, 2021; Soong, 2016). Their cooperation has helped parties to manage disputes and safeguard regional stability through dialogue and mutual development (Xu, 2018). Hence, it can be argued that the cooperation between China and ASEAN has left a positive impact on the peace and stability of the Southeast Asian region. Moreover, experts refer to multiple mechanisms between China and ASEAN that have helped both of them to avoid conflict in the wake of some bilateral issues between them. On the contrary, other experts are sceptical about the positive impact of China's ASEAN cooperation on the peace and stability in the region. They argue that Sino-ASEAN cooperation has created an environment of competition in the region as the USA, Japan, and India are also trying to maintain their influence in this region, which is very important to them for their strategic and economic interests. Further, they also refer to internal divisions within ASEAN, the perception of China being a threat to the region, and disputes like the South China Sea. They further argue that ASEAN-led institutions and mechanisms have limited ability to influence China's strategic behavior, thus, cannot guarantee regional stability (Beeson, 2022). Jones and Jenne (2016) say that ASEAN's institutional framework promotes cooperation but lacks enforcement power, limiting its ability to maintain peace in disputes involving China. Moreover, China's military and economic superiority weakens ASEAN's ability to maintain regional stability in the context of the South China Sea dispute (Cook, 2018). China strategically leverages economic incentives and political influence to divide ASEAN states, weakening regional unity and stability (Le Thu, 2019). Likewise, Yahuda (2019) claims that ASEAN's consensus-based diplomacy allows China to influence decision-making and collective responses. In the context of this debate, it is essential to study the impact of China-ASEAN cooperation on the peace and stability of the region.

This study offers a deep understanding of the China-ASEAN Cooperation and its impact on the peace and stability of the region. Further, the study finds the cooperation between China and ASEAN as a source of competition between China, the USA, India, and Japan for the pursuit of their respective interests. In this way, this research study is very important as it not only explains the bilateral cooperation between China and ASEAN but also focuses on the impact of competition among these powers on the Southeast Asian region. The study is very important for the policy makers and research scholars for its novelty and relevance with trends of studying interstate relations through the prism of international relations theory.

Theoretical Framework

Liberal theory is the most appropriate theory that provides a useful lens for the explanation of China-ASEAN cooperation and its impact on the regional peace. The liberal school of thought argues that economic interdependence through trade and economic cooperation reduces the likelihood of war between the parties. Further, Robert O. Keohane and Joseph (1977) presented the theory of "complex interdependence," which states that states are connected through multiple channels, including economic, political, security, and cultural. Consequently, military force has become less central in resolving the conflicts. Keeping in view their mutual interests, states prefer to resolve their disputes through dialogue rather than through war. Similarly, China and ASEAN have become interdependent through multiple channels, engaged through multiple forums, and have adopted conflict-resolving mechanisms. The economic interdependence and institutional engagement between China and ASEAN have fostered a cooperative environment, paving the way for a more stable regional order even amid unresolved security issues like the South China Sea.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study have been taken from the doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, for the award of a doctorate degree. For this study, a qualitative approach was selected to collect the data. Keeping in view the nature of the study, which seeks to explain the impact of cooperation between two parties on peace and stability, the qualitative method is appropriate to gather the data. The specific information was collected through interviews with members of the concerned field in think tanks, research institutes, and universities, which helped to explore the research goals of the project deeply. In addition to interviews, other primary and secondary sources, policy documents, Archival sources, Books, Research Journals, Periodicals, and Newspapers in the Libraries were also used. Data was analysed using the content analysis method. There is a wide variety of methods of data analysis in social sciences. However, the application of each method depends upon the type of study. Similarly, Content analysis is one of the suitable methods, which is particularly used on those types of data that are available in the form of written texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The global state of affairs remains complex, where every single event in one part of the world leaves a profound impact on the rest of the world. Under the influence of the information and communication technology, virtually though not physically, the world has shrunk into a global village. Moreover, it is not only the states that are the actors in world politics, but there are many organisations, non-state actors, and entities that are affecting the conduct of states in the international system. Thus, the policies and actions of states, organisations, and non-state actors have an international effect. Therefore, the international environment is in constant change. Further, as a consequence of the unilateral policies of states in pursuit of their respective interests, various challenges have emerged in the world. Thus, there are many potential economic, political, and security challenges that the world has to deal with. Furthermore, these numerous challenges are traditional as well as non-traditional in nature. However, in comparison to the other parts of the globe, the East Asian region on the whole has remained stable and continues to move forward. The peace and stability in any part of the world cannot be maintained by any single state, but bilateral and multilateral efforts play a vital role in promoting peace and security, resulting in a peaceful and stable environment.

Similarly, the East Asian countries have worked together for the maintenance of peace and stability across their region. Besides, as a matter of fact, the economic and security interests of the countries have been the driving factors to coordinate their actions. Further, the economic growth and the well-being of the vast populations in the region have also convinced them to jointly work for the regional peace. Simultaneously, China and ASEAN friendship has also significantly facilitated the development of peace and stability in Southeast Asia. Given its economic and strategic interests, China is resolutely dedicated to maintaining peace and promoting development in Asia. Moreover, China believes that the path of peaceful development is associated with peace and stability. Thus, China prefers active diplomacy, which aims at achieving good neighborliness, which is essential for a peaceful, stable environment in the region. Keeping in view its geo-economic and geo-strategic interests, China is promoting a peaceful and conducive environment in the region to facilitate trade and investment activities. China is very much conscious of the significance of peace and stability for the smooth economic progress. Therefore, regional peace is largely attributed to the People's Republic of China (Dosch, 2007).

Accordingly, China stands ready to extend the advantages of economic growth and progress to its neighborhood and Asia at large. Because China is mindful that it will not only facilitate its own economic development, but it will also ensure the eternal peace and collective prosperity throughout the East Asian region. Being a regional power in Asia, China enjoys a significant position in its neighboring area. Having the largest army in the world with modernized weaponry, China has been a hope for many states in this region to maintain peace and stability, and to ensure economic development of the region. Therefore, South East Asian nations see China as an opportunity to address their security problems. They are confronted with many problems, which include traditional and non-traditional threats to their states. Hence, the majority of ASEAN members are willing to get allied with China to address their immediate problems like emerging terrorist threat, maritime security, human and drug trafficking, North Korean nuclear proliferation threat, non-traditional security issues, etc. They believe that China has substantial economic as well as strategic interests in the Southeast Asian region, so China will maintain peace and stability in the region instead of adopting a hegemonic attitude.

While, as close neighbors, the states of South East Asia and China share common interests, covering a variety of areas. Firstly, the regional peace and stability are the long-term goals of both parties, which are also on their priority agenda. Secondly, economic development is the ultimate goal of China and ASEAN; therefore, they have strengthened their cooperation for the promotion of their respective economic interests. Further, non-traditional security issues pose a common threat to both regional players. It requires a multilateral response to address the problems arising from the threats posed by the non-traditional security challenges. However, in the meantime, they also hold different opinions on many issues, concerns, and naturally, they also have some disagreements on many issues of common concern. Though there are disagreements between China and a few ASEAN states concerning the matter of the South China Sea, it does not disturb the overall stability in the South China Sea. Further, the freedom and security of the maritime trade routes near the South China Sea also remain intact. So far, both parties have displayed maturity and adopted effective communication and negotiations on the South China Sea matter, and consequently, they have reached some important and mutually accepted norms for bilateral interaction.

For that reason, China and ASEAN countries have demonstrated their determination to prefer talks and negotiations over confrontation. They have made it clear that disagreements on particular matters are to be addressed by the states which are directly involved in the disputes through peacefully conducted negotiations and consultations. The parties would decide their mutual disputes keeping in view their claims centered on the historical facts, they will also refer to the international law and decide the issues under the light of the Declaration of Conduct (DoC). Further, they have mutually agreed that the peace and security situation of the South China Sea needs to be cooperatively maintained by China and ASEAN nations working together. Hence, both parties have demonstrated their resolve to vigorously promote practical cooperation in maritime affairs and accelerate the process of the formation of instruments to seek cooperation in the areas of common interest.

China seems ready to collaborate with ASEAN nations to encourage the complete and real application of the DoC and the required consultation for the extension of the Code of Conduct (CoC). Thus, China wants to efficiently enhance the two-way communication between the parties and common trust, to develop consent and support of the concerned parties. Hence, the joint efforts of the parties will shape a conducive environment in the region, and it will offer a lot of advantages to the public of all the states in the region. Moreover, Chinese leadership has assured its neighboring countries about the Chinese policy of peaceful co-existence as the only way to maintain peace and stability in the region, which will guarantee smooth economic progress not only for China but for the countries of the Southeast Asian region too. Thus, the joint efforts from both sides have resulted in a positive environment in the region, from a fragile peace to a more stable peace. So evidently, Sino-ASEAN Cooperation has left a significant impact on the peace and stability of the Southeast Asian region. Their multifaceted cooperation involves economic integration, diplomatic engagement, and security dialogue. Economic interdependence, diplomatic engagement through multilateral forums, mechanisms, and security dialogue have helped them to maintain peace and stability in the region.

Economic Interdependence

China and ASEAN are heavily interdependent in terms of trade; China has become the largest trading partner of ASEAN for over two decades. China is a major market for ASEAN exports, and ASEAN is a major source of raw materials, agricultural goods, and intermediate goods for China. Further, China and ASEAN are engaged in mutual investment in various sectors, including production facilities, infrastructure, and the digital economy, etc. Shared infrastructure, FTAs, supply chain linkages, industrial parks, etc., bind them together. In 2024, the trade between China and ASEAN reached US \$ 982.34 billion (Duqiang, 2025). ASEAN was China's second-largest source of agricultural imports, accounting for 15.6 percent of the country's total agricultural import value, and China was ASEAN's second-largest source of foreign investment" (Duqiang, 2025). While the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) fosters economic interdependence between them, the Belt and Road initiative has also driven infrastructure investment in ASEAN member countries, bringing them closer and more interdependent. China provided an estimated \$679 billion from 2013 to 2021 for BRI infrastructure projects, approximately \$346 million to low-income and lower-middle-income countries, and around \$332 billion to upper-middle-income and other countries (Azizi,

2025). Thus, increasing economic interdependence between China and ASEAN has reduced the chances of conflict and caused restraint between them to address their bilateral conflicts peacefully. Keeping in view their mutual economic interests, both parties have adopted a conflict resolution mechanism. Bi (2021) argues that close economic cooperation between China and ASEAN has promoted the growth of bilateral common interests and laid a solid foundation for political relations and regional stability. Further, interactions following economic cooperation, like trade and tourism, also strengthen interdependence and regional integration, which can help mitigate geopolitical risks between China and ASEAN (Chen et al., 2024).

Diplomatic Engagement

China and ASEAN have been engaged through multilateral forums to continue dialogue on bilateral issues. The ASEAN-China summit is the most important multilateral forum that provides a platform for China and ASEAN member countries to discuss issues of their mutual interest. Likewise, ASEAN+3 is another important forum providing China and ASEAN with an important platform to engage with Japan and Korea. Regional Cooperation for Economic Partnership (RCEP) is the latest forum that has been established to promote dialogue and cooperation among China and ASEAN, along with other regional states. These platforms have facilitated dialogue between China and ASEAN, which has enhanced diplomatic trust and managed conflicts between them. Diplomatic norms of ASEAN, such as dialogue, consensus, and non-interference, have helped ASEAN to manage its relations with China, contributing to a cooperative regional order (Acharya, 2014). Moreover, the engagement strategy of ASEAN towards China promotes confidence-building and diplomatic space, which minimizes the chance of tension in the region (Goh,2013). Additionally, mutual interests have compelled China and ASEAN to exercise preventive diplomacy to proactively avert potential conflicts between them.

Security Cooperation

China and ASEAN are also engaged in security cooperation, which has further increased their interdependence. They have established joint cooperation to address the non-traditional security threats like anti-piracy, disaster relief, human trafficking, terrorism, and pandemics. Despite having territorial disputes over the South China Sea, their joint efforts to create mechanisms like the Declaration on Conduct of Parties (DoC) and Code of Conduct (CoC) have helped them to prevent escalation. Moreover, maritime security cooperation between China and ASEAN, including joint initiatives for addressing piracy, maritime safety, and non-traditional security threats, has strengthened regional stability thanks to shared security frameworks (Salim, 2025). In addition, joint steps such as confidence-building measures, declarations, and different negotiation frameworks between China and ASEAN have also helped to prevent escalation over territorial disputes and maintain relative stability (Thayer, 2011).

Table 1. Declarations for Cooperation in the South China Sea

Field	Name of Agreement/Treaty	Founded	China’s Time accession
Cooperation in the South China Sea	Declaration for A Decade of Coastal and Marine Environmental Protection in The South China Sea (2017-2027)	2017	2017
	Guidelines for the Implementation of the DOC	2011	2011
	Terms of Reference of the ASEAN-China Joint Working Group on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea	2004	2004
	Declaration On the Conduct of Parties in The South China Sea	2002	2002

Source: <https://asean.org/asean/external-relations/china/>

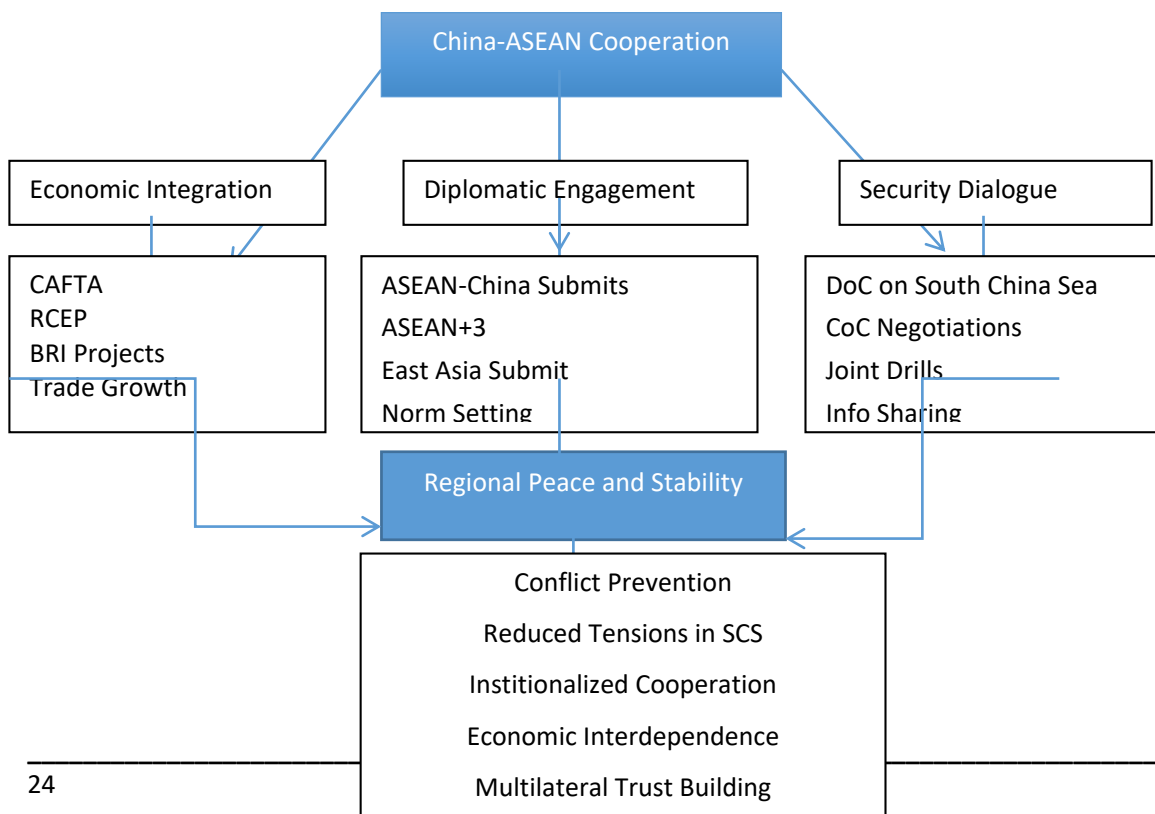
Furthermore, in order to preserve the peace and stability in the region, China and ASEAN have developed multilateral mechanisms to manage the affairs that could disturb the peace and stability in the East Asian region. Practical engagement of China in the multifaceted frameworks of ASEAN, such as ARF, APT, or EAS, has institutionalized cooperation and contributed to regional peacebuilding. The participation of China in regional institutions significantly reduces the threat of China being the hegemonic power in the region. As a result, there are prospects of peace and stability in the region along with economic development (Pichnorak, 2015).

Table 2. Plans of Action between China and ASEAN

Field	Name of Agreement/Treaty	Founded	China's Time accession
Plans of Action	Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2021 - 2025)	2020	2020
	Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2016-2020)	2015	2015
	Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2011-2015)	2010	2010
	Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2005-2010)	2004	2004
	Plan of Action to Implement the Beijing Declaration on ASEAN-China ICT Cooperative Partnership for Common Development	2007	2007

Source: <https://asean.org/asean/external-relations/china/>

All of the above-discussed mechanisms were formed with the plan to preserve peace and stability in the region. Further, ASEAN and its neighboring partners are very much conscious that economic development cannot be achieved without joining hands to uphold peace and stability in their surroundings. Moreover, they are also convinced about the prominence of peace and stability for the smooth and fair economic progress in their countries. Azizi (2025) argues that initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) enhance infrastructure connectivity and economic cooperation, strengthening regional integration and multilateral collaboration between China and ASEAN. Thus, under this realization, all the stakeholders, such as ASEAN, China, the US, Japan, India, and many other important countries of the world, agreed to either establish joint collaboration or join ASEAN-led mechanisms to achieve their long-term economic and strategic interests. Hence, the cooperation between China and ASEAN has left a positive impact on the peace and stability of the region. The following diagram reflects the impact of Sino-ASEAN cooperation on the peace and stability of the region.



CONCLUSIONS

The trajectory of China-ASEAN relations over the past three decades has evolved from cautious engagement to a deeply interwoven partnership characterized by complex interdependence. As the findings of this paper demonstrate, cooperation between China and ASEAN spans a broad spectrum, encompassing robust trade, growing investment flows, joint infrastructure initiatives, and a dense web of diplomatic and security dialogues. These multi-layered engagements have not only reinforced economic growth and integration across Southeast Asia, but have also contributed to a relatively stable regional order. Despite underlying challenges, such as maritime disputes and external geopolitical tensions, the overall impact of Sino-ASEAN cooperation on the peace and stability in the region has been constructive. China's active participation in multilateral forums like the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN plus Three, along with institutionalised mechanisms like the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area and Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, reflects a shared commitment to dialogue, conflict avoidance, and development-based diplomacy. Ultimately, this interdependence serves as a stabilizing force. Economic integration reduces the likelihood of open conflict, diplomatic engagement fosters trust, and collaborative security initiatives build confidence among stakeholders. While the relationship requires careful management to avoid asymmetries and address sensitive issues, Sino-ASEAN cooperation stands today as a cornerstone of regional peace, security, and prosperity in Southeast Asia.

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