



Towards a closer ASEAN-China community: bridging the trust gap in pursuit of a shared future

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ABSTRACT

This study explores China's efforts to advance its vision of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind (CSFM) in partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It argues that a persistent trust deficit remains a significant obstacle to achieving this vision. Based on research conducted in Laos, China, and select ASEAN countries, complemented by interviews with key stakeholders and insights from major conferences, the study adopts a qualitative approach using both primary and secondary sources. It investigates how China leverages the BRI to promote regional cooperation and shared development in pursuit of the CSFM objective. The trust gap is primarily driven by ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea, which continue to pose substantial challenges. Although negotiations for a code of conduct are ongoing, progress remains slow, and a comprehensive agreement has yet to be reached. Through the lens of complex interdependence, the study suggests that, despite geopolitical tensions, strengthening political, economic, and social ties—especially via BRI-related projects—offers meaningful opportunities to build trust and foster collaboration. It also emphasizes the importance of ASEAN's strategic autonomy in maintaining regional stability. Overall, this research provides valuable insights into the potential and limitations of creating a shared future in Southeast Asia by examining the intertwined dynamics of trust, connectivity, and autonomy.

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Introduction

The concept of a CSFM, introduced in 2013, has become a cornerstone of China's foreign policy discourse under President Xi Jinping (MFA-CN, 2023a). It articulates an aspirational vision for global governance premised on mutual respect, common development, and collective security (Xi, 2019; Chen & Mao, 2023). In Southeast Asia, China has actively advanced the CSFM to foster closer regional ties, with particular emphasis on enhancing connectivity,

promoting shared prosperity, and encouraging political dialogue (Nong, 2023; MFA-CN, 2023b). Nonetheless, despite these efforts, significant challenges, including trust gap persists between ASEAN and China, primarily due to unresolved geopolitical tensions, most notably in the South China Sea (SCS).

Recognizing trust as essential to strengthening China-ASEAN relations, leaders at the 26th and 27th ASEAN-China Summits, convened in September 2023 and October 2024 respectively, consistently underscored its

importance. Presiding over the 26th Summit, Indonesian President Joko Widodo remarked that ‘cooperation is only possible if we trust one another’ (MFA-IND, 2023). Echoing this sentiment, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, during discussions on enhancing cooperation between Malaysia, ASEAN, and China, proposed an autonomous and balanced strategy aimed at defending both national and regional interests while highlighting the critical role of mutual trust (Guo Xiong, 2024). Recurrent tensions in the SCS, repeatedly highlighted in ASEAN-China chairman’s statements, continue to expose the depth of the trust gap. The 27th Summit chair reaffirmed that building mutual trust is crucial for enhancing ASEAN’s engagement with external partners, particularly China (ASEAN, 2024). In that sense, this persistent trust gap remains a key obstacle to China’s broader ambition of advancing regional integration under the CSFM framework.

Against this backdrop, this study addresses two central research questions: how has China sought to operationalise the CSFM in its relations with ASEAN? And to what extent does deepening interdependence mitigate the trust gap in the region? Drawing on field research conducted in Laos, China, and selected ASEAN member states, as well as interviews with diplomats, experts, and participants at regional conferences, this paper employs a qualitative methodology grounded in both primary and secondary sources. The central argument advanced is that while persistent geopolitical frictions constrain efforts to enhance mutual trust, expanding political, economic, and social linkages, particularly through initiatives such as the BRI, generate unique opportunities for closer cooperation. Applying the theoretical framework of complex interdependence as articulated by Keohane and Nye (1977; 2012), the study demonstrates that increased connectivity can substantially offset geopolitical tensions by cultivating dense networks of interaction that elevate the costs of conflict and deepen regional engagement.

In doing so, this paper contributes to the broader literature on China-ASEAN relations, regionalism, and trust-building in international politics (Acharya, 2021). It provides an empirical analysis of the interplay between trust, connectivity, and strategic autonomy, and offers a critical assessment of the prospects and limitations of constructing a shared future community in Southeast Asia.

Literature Review

The CSFM has become increasingly prominent in China’s external relations discourse since its introduction by President Xi Jinping in 2013, articulating a vision for a global order rooted in mutual respect for sovereignty, inclusive development,

collective security, and equitable governance (Xi, 2019; MFA-CN, 2023a). It reflects both China’s normative aspiration for a multipolar international system and its strategic interest in reshaping global narratives to accommodate greater Chinese leadership (Chen & Mao, 2023). Scholars interpret the CSFM variably, which some view it as a normative project aimed at reconfiguring global governance along Chinese values (Nouwens, 2023; Lye, 2024), while others view it as a strategic narrative that complements flagship initiatives like the BRI (Fulcrum, 2024). In Southeast Asia, the CSFM is closely tied to China’s soft power ambitions, particularly through enhanced connectivity and long-term economic engagement.

While many regional states engage with the CSFM’s cooperative rhetoric, skepticism remains. The lack of clarity regarding China’s intentions, especially in the context of maritime disputes and strategic autonomy, fuels persistent trust deficits (Mia et al., 2024). Although connectivity initiatives under the BRI have boosted infrastructure and interdependence, their role in trust-building remains uneven. Moreover, references such as Doshi (2021) and Yale (2023) require clarification or substitution with more directly relevant, verifiable sources, as their association with the CSFM in this context is not clearly established in current literature. Strengthening empirical grounding will be essential to assessing how the CSFM tangibly shapes ASEAN-China relations.

The persistent trust gap between ASEAN and China has been widely documented, especially around questions of sovereignty and maritime security. Scholars such as Huang (2017) and Mounnarath (2021) argue that unresolved disputes in the SCS continue to undermine China’s portrayal of itself as a benign regional partner. Despite the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) and ongoing Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations, skepticism remains high among ASEAN states regarding Beijing’s long-term strategic intentions (Mia et al., 2024). Trust, therefore, emerges as a core challenge for the CSFM’s realisation in Southeast Asia. While official rhetoric emphasizes mutual benefit and shared future, underlying tensions reflect a mismatch between China’s discursive commitments and actions on the ground.

Efforts at regionalism and trust-building in Southeast Asia are shaped by ASEAN’s long-standing emphasis on norms such as consensus, non-interference, and, critically, strategic autonomy. Research by Acharya (2021), Kuik (2022), and Chea (2023) highlights ASEAN’s preference for informal, inclusive, and flexible forms of cooperation, norms that often clash with more centralised or state-led external initiatives. This context conditions how ASEAN engages with

Chinese initiatives like the BRI and the CSFM; while member states appreciate the economic benefits of enhanced ‘connectivity’, they are also wary of overdependence and encroachments on sovereignty. Accordingly, many have adopted hedging strategies that combine economic engagement with security diversification and alignment with other powers in order to preserve autonomy and balance external influence (Emmers, 2023; Marston, 2023).

The theoretical framework of complex interdependence, developed by Keohane and Nye (1977) and revisited in later works (2012) and interviews (Nye, 2024), provides a compelling lens for analyzing the interplay of trust, connectivity, and autonomy in ASEAN-China relations. The theory posits that multiple, overlapping channels of interaction, economic, political, and societal, can mitigate the risk of conflict by fostering shared interests and increasing the costs of strategic rivalry. Arkin (2023) emphasizes that sustained connectivity fosters ‘stability through embeddedness,’ while Pathak and Baibouritian (2024) introduce the concept of ‘connectivity dependency,’ in which dense regional networks reduce incentives for confrontation. Within this framework, the CSFM operates as an aspirational model for strengthening trust through mutual interdependence, with China presenting the BRI as the central mechanism for operationalizing this vision. China’s 2023 White Paper identifies the BRI as integral to the advancement of CSFM objectives (MFA-CN, 2023a).

Recent studies (Yu et al., 2020; Chuvilov & Malevich, 2022; Nouwens, 2023) affirm that connectivity initiatives under the BRI have significantly expanded ASEAN-China linkages, bolstering trade, infrastructure development, and people-to-people exchanges. However, these connections have not eliminated geopolitical tensions; rather, they operate alongside them. What emerges is a dual dynamic in which deeper connectivity can support ‘incremental trust-building’, even as unresolved disputes and concerns about sovereignty sustain strategic caution.

Despite a growing body of scholarship on ASEAN-China relations, significant gaps persist. Much of the existing literature primarily addresses the geopolitical risks and macro-level implications, often overlooking the localized impacts of connectivity initiatives on trust. Additionally, there is limited integration of field-based perspectives from practitioners and policymakers. Furthermore, the role of strategic autonomy as a stabilizing force within the broader context of ASEAN-China interdependence remains insufficiently explored. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing an empirical analysis of how connectivity initiatives, such as the BRI, shape trust dynamics in ASEAN-China

relations. It contributes to a deeper understanding of how the CSFM is operationalized regionally and how ASEAN balances its engagement with China while maintaining strategic autonomy in the evolving regional order.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore China’s efforts to advance the CSFM and address the trust gap with ASEAN. Qualitative methods provide the depth needed to understand the complex dynamics of political trust and regional cooperation that quantitative data alone cannot explain. Primary data was collected through field research in Laos, China, and selected ASEAN countries between 2022 and 2024. This included semi-structured interviews with diplomats, policymakers, scholars, and experts from China and ASEAN, selected via purposive and snowball sampling. Observations were made during relevant conferences and workshops on ASEAN-China relations and regional cooperation. Official documents, speeches, policy papers, and Chinese white papers were reviewed to capture official narratives. Secondary data included academic articles, think tank reports, and reputable media coverage.

Data analysis followed a thematic coding strategy, with interview transcripts, field notes, and documents coded to identify key themes related to trust, connectivity, and strategic autonomy. The complex interdependence framework guided the analysis of how economic, political, and societal linkages interact with strategic competition in shaping ASEAN-China relations. Limitations include potential biases due to the sensitive nature of the SCS issue, which may have affected interviewee openness. To address this, multiple sources were triangulated. Additionally, fieldwork coverage was limited in some ASEAN countries due to logistical constraints. Nonetheless, the study provides a comprehensive and rigorous analysis of trust and regional cooperation dynamics.

China’s Advancement of the CSFM in ASEAN

China’s promotion of the CSFM has become central to its evolving strategy toward Southeast Asia under President Xi Jinping. The CSFM framework reflects Beijing’s vision of a global order characterized by mutual respect, common development, collective security, and cultural inclusivity. Given ASEAN’s geographic proximity, economic vitality, and strategic significance, the region serves as a crucial testing ground for translating the CSFM from principle into practice (Nong, 2023).

The BRI lies at the heart of China’s CSFM engagement in Southeast Asia. While often framed as an infrastructure-led development strategy, the BRI has also been positioned as a normative platform for advancing political trust and regional integration. China’s 2023 White Paper on the BRI explicitly identified it as a ‘practical platform’ for advancing the CSFM through economic cooperation and people-to-people

exchange (MFA-CN, 2023a). Since its launch in 2013, ASEAN states, including Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore, have welcomed the BRI, largely viewing Chinese investment as a catalyst for domestic development (Nouwens, 2023; Hong, 2024). Quantitative data reflects the growing salience of the BRI in the region. According to the China Global Investment Tracker, Chinese investment and construction in Southeast Asia rose from USD 72.89 billion (2005–2011) to USD 125.26 billion (2013–2022), with Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia among the top recipients (Hong, 2024). The region has become China's leading BRI destination, accounting for 23% of global BRI investment during this period, surpassing West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Chinese capital has flowed into industrial parks, tourism infrastructure, and real estate, generating spillover effects on regional growth and connectivity (Ibid.).

Beijing's emphasis on infrastructure and connectivity aligns with a broader strategic calculation: deepening interdependence as a means to build trust and reduce the risk of conflict. This logic draws from complex interdependence framework, which posits that multifaceted linkages, economic, institutional, and societal, can mitigate zero-sum rivalry and foster cooperation despite political tensions (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Zhang, 2021). Through trade facilitation, digital partnerships, and transport corridors, China seeks to create a regional ecosystem in which diverging from its developmental orbit becomes economically and diplomatically costly. Diplomatic engagement has further reinforced the CSFM's regional narrative. Since 2013, ASEAN-China summits have institutionalized high-level dialogue on peace and development under CSFM principles. The 2021 elevation of ASEAN-China ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was framed by Beijing as a step toward operationalizing the CSFM in Southeast Asia (MFA-CN, 2021). At the multilateral level, China has consistently affirmed ASEAN centrality in platforms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (MFA-CN, 2022). However, not all ASEAN members have fully embraced the CSFM concept. Brunei, the Philippines, and Singapore have notably abstained from signing bilateral agreements on jointly advancing the CSFM, while others like Vietnam have employed cautious and calibrated language (Lye, 2024). This selective engagement reflects ongoing concerns over sovereignty, strategic dependence, and the ambiguity of China's long-term intentions (Fulcrum, 2024; Mia et al., 2024).

Hedging behavior remains a defining feature of ASEAN's strategic calculus. Many regional states, while welcoming Chinese economic engagement, continue to cultivate deeper relations with other powers, particularly the US, India, Japan, and Australia (Emmers, 2023; Marston, 2023). Such behavior underscores the limits of normative persuasion and the resilience of Southeast Asia's long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy (Wang, 2021; Chea, 2023). To address lingering apprehensions, Chinese diplomatic discourse has increasingly emphasised 'mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.' Initiatives such as the Global Development

Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) have been framed as reinforcing the CSFM and offering ASEAN countries additional platforms for cooperation on development, governance, and cultural exchange (Kewalramani, 2024). These narratives are designed to assure regional partners of China's benign intentions and support for a multipolar regional order.

Cultural and educational diplomacy also play a prominent role in Beijing's CSFM strategy. As of 2023, over 175,000 Chinese and ASEAN students were engaged in cross-border education programs (Xinhua, 2024). Meanwhile, mechanisms such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation initiative have been deployed to promote sub-regional development in areas such as water governance, public health, and rural livelihoods. Backed by a USD 300 million special fund, this initiative has supported over 800 projects across Mekong countries. Myanmar alone has benefited from 118 projects valued at USD 35.2 million between 2017 and 2024, reflecting a micro-level application of CSFM ideals (LMC, 2024; Xinhua, 2025).

To conclude, China's promotion of the CSFM in ASEAN reflects a multidimensional strategy that combines material inducement, discursive framing, and institution-building. While the CSFM narrative resonates with ASEAN's development priorities and regional aspirations, its institutionalization faces persistent challenges. Realising the vision will depend on Beijing's ability to deliver concrete benefits, manage regional sensitivities, and support ASEAN's pursuit of strategic autonomy within an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific order.

Trust - Geopolitical Constraints

Despite China's active promotion of the Community of Shared Future for Mankind (CSFM) and the growing web of interactions facilitated by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), enduring geopolitical tensions continue to undermine mutual trust between China and ASEAN (Caballero-Anthony, 2022). Chief among these challenges are the unresolved maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), which remain a significant obstacle to the advancement of regional community-building efforts (Storey, 2023; Yaacob, 2024). The SCS disputes involve overlapping territorial claims between China and several ASEAN member states, notably Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. China's expansive maritime claims, marked by the so-called 'nine-dash line,' along with its continued construction of artificial islands equipped with military installations, have exacerbated concerns regarding Beijing's strategic intentions (Mia et al., 2024).

Interviews with regional diplomats and security experts reveal a prevalent perception that China's actions in the SCS stand in contradiction to the foundational principles of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect that underpin ASEAN's vision of regional order. As one Southeast Asian diplomat remarked, 'it is difficult to talk about a shared future when basic sovereignty concerns remain unresolved.' This erosion of trust is further intensified by the asymmetrical nature of ASEAN-China relations. While ASEAN member states collectively seek to harness economic opportunities through engagement with China,

there is growing apprehension that increased economic dependence may constrain their capacity to assert sovereign rights and pursue independent foreign policy trajectories (Li & Ying, 2021). These concerns were repeatedly articulated during regional conferences between 2022 and 2024, where several ASEAN representatives emphasized the necessity of a 'rules-based approach' to managing maritime disputes and upholding the interests of smaller states.

In response, ASEAN and China have pursued negotiations to establish a Code of Conduct (COC) for the SCS, intended to create a legally binding framework to govern the conduct of relevant parties and to ensure peaceful dispute resolution (Yang, 2023). However, progress has been protracted and uneven. Interviews with officials participating in the negotiations indicate persistent divergences on critical issues, including the geographic scope of applicability, the role of external actors, and the mechanisms for enforcement and dispute settlement. While Beijing has publicly pledged to expedite the conclusion of the COC, analysts caution that such declarations may remain largely rhetorical, given the strategic and economic stakes involved in the SCS (Yaacob, 2024). This disconnect between rhetorical commitments and practical implementation continues to fuel skepticism among ASEAN states. Moreover, concerns persist regarding China's genuine willingness to commit to a binding and enforceable COC. A regional maritime security expert noted that fears remain that the COC could devolve into a political instrument devoid of substantive legal safeguards, particularly if it lacks robust mechanisms for dispute resolution (Li, 2025).

In essence, the SCS disputes constitute a fundamental constraint on the realisation of the CSFM in Southeast Asia. While initiatives like the BRI have fostered unique avenues of connectivity and economic interdependence, these positive developments are frequently overshadowed by sovereignty disputes that strike at the core of national identity and political legitimacy for many ASEAN states. For the CSFM to be meaningfully realised, both China and ASEAN must demonstrate a greater willingness to compromise and to address these foundational issues. Deepened interdependence through connectivity may serve as a vehicle for fostering trust, but without corresponding political and legal commitments, efforts to construct a closer regional community will remain hampered by unresolved tensions.

Connectivity - Complex Interdependence

The framework of complex interdependence offers a valuable lens for analysing contemporary ASEAN-China relations. First articulated by Keohane and Nye (1977), this concept posits that in a world characterised by multiple channels of interaction, diverse issue areas, and a diminished role for military force among interdependent actors, cooperation becomes both necessary and mutually beneficial, even amidst persistent tensions. Applied to Southeast Asia, this perspective reveals that although unresolved geopolitical disputes such as those in the SCS persist, the deepening economic, political, and social linkages between ASEAN and China are generating significant opportunities for collaboration (Li & Ying, 2022;

Yang et al., 2023).

China's regional initiatives, most notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have played a pivotal role in enhancing connectivity between ASEAN and China. The expansion of transport corridors, logistics hubs, and special economic zones has facilitated increased trade and investment flows while advancing a shared development agenda across Southeast Asia (Nouwens, 2023; Hong, 2024). Empirical observations from fieldwork in Laos, Cambodia, and Indonesia suggest that flagship BRI projects, such as the Laos-China Railway and the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail, have significantly upgraded infrastructure, lowered logistical costs, and strengthened the region's trade capacity. For example, the Laos-China Railway has reduced travel time between Kunming in China's Yunnan Province and Vientiane, the capital of Laos, from approximately 24 hours by road to just 10.5 hours by rail (China Daily, 2023). In 2024, the railway facilitated the export of Lao coffee beans to Europe via China-Europe freight services, completing the journey in only 15 days (GT, 2025). Similarly, a cold-chain logistics route transporting 286 metric tons of fresh vegetables between Kunming and Bangkok now takes just 55 hours, shortening delivery time by a full day and reducing logistics costs by an estimated 20 percent compared to conventional multi-modal methods (China Daily, 2023). Beyond enhancing physical connectivity, the Laos-China Railway is also viewed as contributing to improved debt sustainability and reducing financial uncertainty for Laos, thereby offering a potential pathway toward long-term economic stability (World Bank, 2023). These concrete economic outcomes underscore the deepening economic interdependence between ASEAN and China, even as strategic mistrust and geopolitical tensions continue to shape regional dynamics.

Beyond infrastructure, cooperation has deepened through regional mechanisms such as the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), as well as through bilateral agreements. China has become ASEAN's largest trading partner over the past three decades, while ASEAN has simultaneously become China's top trading partner. Bilateral trade reached over USD 722 billion in 2022, accounting for nearly one-fifth of ASEAN's global trade (Wester, 2023). Trade and investment flows, largely driven by frameworks such as ACFTA and RCEP, have surged. For instance, Chinese investment into ASEAN reached USD 15.4 billion in 2022, spurred by infrastructure, digital technologies, and green development (ibid.). These arrangements have encouraged deeper supply chain integration and promoted the diffusion of advanced technologies throughout the region. According to Estrades et al. (2023), RCEP is projected to increase the annual GDP of all member countries, including ASEAN and China, by 0.21% by 2035. These economic partnerships institutionalise interdependence, embedding mutual interests in stable relations. Interviews with regional policymakers affirm that economic constituencies in both ASEAN and China increasingly support peaceful dispute resolution to avoid disruptions to trade and investment.

In parallel, people-to-people exchanges have played a crucial role in strengthening political and social ties between ASEAN and China. Over the past decade, educational programs, cultural exchanges, tourism, and sister-city partnerships have expanded significantly. China's provision of scholarships to ASEAN students, the establishment of Confucius Institutes, and ASEAN-China cultural festivals have been pivotal in fostering mutual understanding at the societal level. This commitment to closer cooperation has been further solidified under the ASEAN-China Year of People-to-People Exchange, which aligns with the ASEAN-China Plan of Action 2021-2025 and 2026-2030. Various projects and activities designed to enhance cultural and people-to-people connectivity are set for implementation across ASEAN Member States and China (ASEAN, 2025). While high-level strategic trust gap remains, discussions at regional forums indicate that younger generations and civil society actors tend to engage with China more pragmatically, focusing on economic opportunities and cultural exchanges rather than on geopolitical issues.

Basically, improved connectivity, both physical and societal, plays a critical role in fostering trust between ASEAN and China. By establishing multiple channels of interaction, it reduces the risk of conflict escalation through the promotion of sustained cooperation and mutual dependence (Keohane & Nye, 2012). While connectivity alone cannot resolve sovereignty disputes or fully mitigate strategic dilemmas, it increases the costs of confrontation and thus acts as a disincentive for conflict (Zhang, 2021; Arkin, 2023). Interviews with ASEAN policymakers consistently underscore the importance of maintaining open lines of communication and cooperation, particularly in economic and sociocultural spheres, as essential mechanisms for managing tensions with China while advancing national development objectives.

Public perceptions of China's initiatives, especially the CSFM, are also evolving across Southeast Asia. According to a 2024 ISEAS survey, a majority of Southeast Asians exhibit a generally positive view of the CSFM. Specifically, 61.4% of respondents believe the initiative benefits ASEAN: 31.3% perceive it as complementary to ASEAN's own efforts, while 30.1% view it as advantageous for the region. However, concerns remain, 18.6% of respondents cited the risk of divisiveness, and 13.1% expressed apprehension that the CSFM might undermine ASEAN centrality (Seah et al., 2024). These findings suggest that while skepticism persists within political circles, public sentiment leans toward cautious optimism and a willingness to explore deeper engagement with China. Nevertheless, complex interdependence does not erase power asymmetries or eliminate strategic uncertainties. Several ASEAN member states continue to express wariness over potential overdependence on China and actively pursue diversified relations with other major powers such as Japan, the US, and the EU (Wen, 2022; Wester, 2023). This strategic hedging reflects a broader effort to balance deepening economic interdependence with the preservation of national autonomy. At its core, complex interdependence offers both significant opportunities and inherent limitations for ASEAN-China

relations. While geopolitical tensions remain a persistent challenge, the growing web of political, economic, and social linkages, driven by the BRI and related initiatives, serves as a critical platform for sustained engagement and incremental trust-building. Advancing a more stable and cooperative regional order aligned with the CSFM vision will require ongoing efforts to deepen mutual trust, while simultaneously preserving ASEAN's autonomy and reinforcing its commitment to an inclusive, rules-based regional architecture.

Strategic Autonomy - Regional Response

ASEAN's commitment to strategic autonomy remains a cornerstone of its approach to managing regional order amid intensifying major power competition. Rooted in principles of non-alignment, inclusiveness, and consensus-building, ASEAN seeks to maintain regional stability by preserving its centrality and resisting pressures to align exclusively with any external power (Acharya, 2021; Yoshimatsu, 2023). In the evolving context of China's promotion of the CSFM and the broader China-US rivalry, ASEAN's efforts to uphold strategic autonomy have become even more critical (Zhang, 2023).

Strategic autonomy for ASEAN entails the capacity to make independent choices in foreign policy without succumbing to the influence or dominance of external actors. Field research across multiple ASEAN capitals underscores a consistent emphasis on the importance of maintaining diplomatic flexibility and avoiding entanglement in great power conflicts. Interviews with regional diplomats and experts reveal that ASEAN views strategic autonomy as essential to safeguarding both national sovereignty and the cohesion of the bloc as a whole.

ASEAN navigates the complex strategic environment by adopting a hedging strategy, balancing engagement with multiple major powers while avoiding excessive dependence on any single actor (ibid.). This is evident in ASEAN's simultaneous pursuit of deeper economic ties with China through mechanisms such as the BRI, ACFTA, and RCEP, while also strengthening security and political relations with external partners like the US, Japan, Australia, India, and the EU. Initiatives such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) reflect ASEAN's proactive attempt to frame regional cooperation around principles of openness, inclusivity, and a rules-based order, rather than aligning with competing strategic visions (ASEAN, 2023).

Empirical findings from interviews and regional conference observations suggest that ASEAN member states adopt differentiated hedging strategies shaped by their unique strategic interests and threat perceptions. For example, Vietnam and the Philippines tend to pursue a more assertive stance in defending maritime claims while simultaneously maintaining cautious economic engagement with China, an approach consistent with analyses by Gerstl (2022), Camba (2023), and Hoang (2024). In contrast, countries such as Cambodia and Laos display a greater degree of alignment with Chinese initiatives, yet continue to underscore the significance of ASEAN-led frameworks and multilateralism in maintaining regional balance (Trinh, 2022; Chea, 2023). These strategic variations reflect ASEAN's internal

heterogeneity but also reaffirm its collective commitment to preserving regional autonomy and pursuing coordinated responses to external challenges. Maintaining centrality remains essential for ensuring regional stability and strategic balance. Platforms such as the EAS, ARF, and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus provide inclusive mechanisms for dialogue, confidence-building, and cooperative security, helping to mitigate the risks associated with great power rivalry (Yoshimatsu, 2023; Chea, 2023). Through leadership in these multilateral frameworks, the bloc positions itself as both an agenda-setter and norm entrepreneur, cultivating a regional order grounded in peaceful conflict management and shared responsibility. However, the pursuit of strategic autonomy faces persistent challenges. External geopolitical pressures, internal divergences, and asymmetrical power dynamics among member states occasionally hinder consensus-building and collective action. Recent developments in the SCS and the varied responses to competing great power initiatives underscore the enduring fragility of unity and centrality (Caballero-Anthony, 2022; Baharudin, 2023). Nonetheless, resilience lies in pragmatic adaptability, a preference for incremental progress, and an unwavering commitment to dialogue, all of which sustain its role as a central actor in navigating the region's evolving strategic landscape.

In brief, strategic autonomy functions both as a shield against external domination and as a stabilising force in regional affairs. By balancing ties with major powers and reinforcing internal cohesion, the grouping strengthens its capacity to navigate strategic competition and foster a more stable, inclusive order. This careful diplomacy is vital to realising broader visions like the CSFM, ensuring Southeast Asia remains an active agent, not merely a passive arena, in shaping the future of Asia-Pacific geopolitics.

Findings, Discussion, and Implications

Key Findings, a central finding of this study is the evolving nature of trust between ASEAN and China, shaped by broader geopolitical currents. While territorial disputes in the SCS remain unresolved, the analysis reveals that initiatives such as the BRI have played a meaningful role in narrowing the trust gap. These initiatives promote deeper economic interdependence and sustained diplomatic engagement. Rather than being overshadowed by geopolitical frictions, enhanced connectivity, through infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and people-to-people exchanges, has opened unique avenues for enhancing cooperation and mutual understanding (Hong, 2024). The BRI's support for regional integration offers tangible development gains to ASEAN member states

while fostering constructive dialogue on political and strategic matters. Although concerns persist, particularly regarding maritime sovereignty, the strengthening of physical and institutional linkages is gradually cultivating a more collaborative environment (Yang et al., 2023). In this context, connectivity emerges not only as a driver of economic progress but also as a mechanism for building trust and reinforcing regional harmony.

Another key finding is that economic connectivity, particularly through flagship projects like the Laos–China Railway, serves as a powerful enabler of trust. Such infrastructure improves trade routes, lowers transportation costs, and strengthens regional integration (World Bank, 2023; Mounnarath cited in Fulcrum, 2024). Countries like Laos and Cambodia increasingly view BRI investments as essential for economic diversification and regional connectivity (Trinh, 2022). This is reflected in the Lao Prime Minister's remarks in an exclusive interview with CGTN (2025), where he emphasised the strong and multifaceted Laos-China partnership, anchored in political, economic, and infrastructural cooperation under the BRI. These examples underscore that deepening economic ties can advance both mutual respect and regional stability.

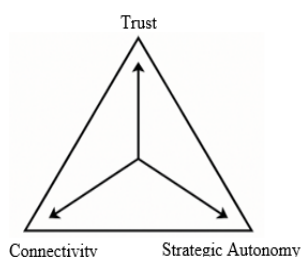
The study also underscores the internal diversity within ASEAN. While countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines adopt more cautious stances toward China, driven by concerns over sovereignty and strategic competition, this diversity serves as a strength (Gerstl, 2022). It highlights ASEAN's ability to accommodate varying national interests while maintaining cohesion and fostering ongoing dialogue. In this way, ASEAN demonstrates a pragmatic and adaptive diplomatic posture in navigating complex regional dynamics. As Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim emphasized during his remarks at the ASEAN Future Forum 2025 in Hanoi, preserving and strengthening ASEAN's cohesion is crucial amid global uncertainties (DAV, 2025). Furthermore, ASEAN's commitment to strategic autonomy emerges as a vital asset in engaging China's CSFM. This autonomy enables member states to pursue development opportunities while maintaining foreign policy independence (Nong, 2023; Banlaoi, 2024). It empowers ASEAN to engage major powers on its own terms without compromising its core principles.

The finding concludes that the relationship between 'connectivity, trust, and strategic autonomy' forms a dynamic, mutually reinforcing triad. Enhanced connectivity drives economic engagement, which builds trust; in turn, trust fosters an environment where states can exercise strategic autonomy. For China's CSFM to resonate in Southeast Asia, it must go beyond

material linkages and align with ASEAN's principles of sovereignty, equity, and inclusivity. This triadic framework below offers a sustainable path toward shared prosperity and regional peace.

Interdependent Triad:

Trust-Connectivity-Strategic Autonomy



- **Connectivity ↔ Trust:** regular interaction, through infrastructure, trade, and cultural exchange, builds mutual understanding and dependability.
- **Trust ↔ Strategic Autonomy:** As trust grows, fears of dominance decrease, allowing greater autonomy and deeper cooperation.
- **Strategic Autonomy ↔ Connectivity:** Autonomy enables ASEAN members to shape their engagement terms, while well-managed connectivity reinforces autonomy through balanced, mutually beneficial relations.

Discussion, China's efforts to position itself as a constructive partner in Southeast Asia have created both opportunities and challenges. While ASEAN countries generally appreciate China's economic engagement, ongoing tensions in the SCS and concerns about the transparency and governance of BRI projects persist (Jie & Ce, 2023). These concerns do not automatically erode trust, but they highlight the need for China to address critical issues such as good governance, transparency, and debt sustainability. Long-term development assistance, particularly when aligned with national priorities, is broadly welcomed, but it must be matched with predictability and mutual respect. China's responsiveness in these areas presents an opportunity to strengthen its partnership with ASEAN and enhance the credibility of its CSFM vision, which is crucial for fostering regional cohesion (Ji, 2023; Banlaoi, 2024).

The AOIP framework offers a clear normative framework grounded in multilateralism, inclusivity, and adherence to shared norms (ASEAN, 2023). Through platforms such as the AOIP, ASEAN advocates for peaceful conflict resolution, cooperation, and mutual benefit. Significantly, strategic hedging enables ASEAN to maintain its flexibility and agency, reinforcing its commitment to a rules-based order that prevents any single power from dominating regional affairs (Ng & Li, 2023). While economic ties with China are deeply appreciated, ASEAN's growing emphasis on transparency, inclusive growth, and debt sustainability, signals a shift in expectations. These areas offer opportunities for dialogue and reform, which China must embrace if it is to align more closely with ASEAN's principles and secure deeper, long-term collaboration (Nouwens, 2023).

Notably, BRI infrastructure investments not only strengthen China's ties with individual ASEAN countries but also enhance intra-ASEAN connectivity, supporting the ASEAN Master Plan on Connectivity 2025 and the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 (Hong, 2024). These projects can help foster regional

integration, innovation, and sustainable development. However, for the CSFM to be fully embraced, China must demonstrate a genuine commitment to transparency, sustainability, and mutual respect, aligning its economic strategies with ASEAN's core values. ASEAN's consistent emphasis on strategic autonomy, coupled with meaningful connectivity and growing trust, positions the region to shape a more balanced and cooperative regional order. Embracing the triadic framework of trust, connectivity, and strategic autonomy as early discussed as a guiding principle could not only deepen ASEAN-China relations but also advance a peaceful, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific.

China has increasingly called on Southeast Asian nations to uphold their strategic autonomy, urging them to exercise sovereignty free from external influence, particularly from the US (Tan & Lye, 2025). However, this call has not been without contradictions. While Beijing advocates for Southeast Asian nations to assert their autonomy vis-à-vis external powers like the US, it simultaneously pushes for these countries to align with China in an 'Asia run by Asians' regional order, thereby presenting a disjuncture in how strategic autonomy is understood by both sides (Lye, 2024). Southeast Asian countries have a strong track record of strategic autonomy, ensuring national resilience, and maintaining a non-aligned stance that allows them to engage with a diverse range of external powers based on their national interests (Yoshimatsu, 2023). However, China's perception of these nations' actions is often skewed, as it tends to view their cooperation with the US as undermining their agency and sovereignty (Li, 2025).

Moreover, China's calls to prevent 'extra-regional powers' from interfering in the region's affairs clash with ASEAN's 'inclusive strategic outlook,' which seeks to engage all external powers, not just China (Chea, 2023). This contradiction is further compounded by China's own actions in the region, where it has sometimes interfered in the internal affairs of Southeast Asian states to serve its interests (Tan & Lye, 2025). Southeast Asian countries, however, are unlikely to collectively oppose China, unless Beijing significantly threatens their interests. It is crucial for China to recognize that regional countries have the agency to define and pursue their national interests through multi-directional partnerships, engaging not only with China but also with other external powers as they see fit (Chea, 2023).

In a broader context, China's approach to the SCS remains a point of contention. At a press conference on March 7, 2025, Foreign Minister Wang Yi elaborated on China's efforts to maintain peace and stability in the

SCS, underscoring the region's importance as the safest and busiest waters for international navigation (MFA-CN, 2025). Through bilateral dialogues and agreements, such as those with Indonesia and Malaysia, China has aimed to promote cooperation in maritime issues (ibid.). While these initiatives are commendable, they must not be seen as an excuse for disregarding regional concerns or imposing Beijing's interests on other claimant states. The emphasis on dialogue and cooperation is vital, but China must demonstrate genuine respect for ASEAN's autonomy in managing regional maritime disputes, ensuring that its actions align with the broader goals of peace, stability, and mutual respect.

Thus, while the CSFM holds potential to enhance ASEAN-China relations, China's approach to regional security, governance, and strategic autonomy will ultimately determine whether it is perceived as a true partner or as a power seeking to exert control under the guise of cooperative development. Meaningful engagement, built on trust, transparency, and a genuine respect for ASEAN's autonomy and diversity, is essential for the CSFM to succeed and for ASEAN-China relations to evolve into a more balanced, sustainable, and cooperative framework.

Implications, China's efforts to position itself as a constructive partner through the CSFM offer both prospects and limitations for ASEAN-China relations. While China's economic engagement presents significant benefits for ASEAN, concerns regarding transparency, debt sustainability, and governance remain key obstacles. ASEAN's growing emphasis on inclusive growth, sustainability, and accountability presents China with the opportunity to align its initiatives more closely with ASEAN's core values, strengthening trust and enhancing regional cooperation (Zhang, 2023).

The BRI, central to China's regional strategy, contributes to intra-ASEAN connectivity and the ASEAN's goal for regional connectivity, which supports trade, innovation, and sustainable development. By improving infrastructure and fostering stronger economic links, these projects could contribute to the broader goal of a shared future if they are aligned with ASEAN's developmental priorities. China's advocacy for strategic autonomy in Southeast Asia must also be viewed in light of ASEAN's long-standing approach to balancing relationships with multiple external powers. While ASEAN countries value the opportunity to engage freely with both China and other powers like the US, China's strategic messaging must respect ASEAN's agency in pursuing independent foreign policies (Tan & Lye, 2025). Recognizing this

would create space for meaningful partnerships and enhance regional stability.

In the SCS, China's call for peace and stability must be supported by consistent adherence to the DOC and the COC. ASEAN's role in shaping these frameworks is vital to ensuring that the region remains a space for cooperation and peaceful dispute resolution. The successful resolution of these issues would significantly strengthen 'trust' between ASEAN and China, advancing their shared vision of a peaceful, inclusive Indo-Pacific as a whole. In that sense, the success of the CSFM depends on China's ability to integrate ASEAN's priorities, particularly transparency, sustainability, and good governance, into its development strategies. By doing so, China can contribute to a balanced, cooperative regional order, ensuring that ASEAN and China share a future of mutual benefit, peace, and prosperity.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the evolving dynamics between ASEAN and China, focusing on bridging the trust gap towards the ambitious vision of the CSFM and its implications for regional cooperation. Key findings reveal that while ASEAN continues to value China's economic engagement, there are persistent challenges related to transparency, governance, and sovereignty concerns, particularly in the context of the BRI. These issues highlight the critical importance of aligning China's development strategies with ASEAN's principles of inclusivity, sustainability, and good governance. Without such alignment, the long-term viability of the CSFM as a genuine and cooperative framework remains in question.

The discussion demonstrates that ASEAN's strategic autonomy and agency are fundamental in shaping the region's foreign policy decisions. While China has sought to position itself as a central player in regional governance, its vision must accommodate the region's diverse political, economic, and security concerns. ASEAN's emphasis on multilateralism and inclusive growth provides opportunities for deeper collaboration, but this will require China to adjust its approach to one that is more transparent, predictable, and responsive to ASEAN's evolving needs. Meanwhile, the implications of this analysis underscore that for the CSFM to resonate more effectively with ASEAN, China must foster an environment of trust and collaboration, ensuring that its initiatives contribute to the region's sustainable development and regional peace. Intra-ASEAN connectivity, the South China Sea dispute resolution, and the adoption of transparent governance frameworks for the BRI are pivotal areas where China's approach could reinforce or undermine the success of the CSFM. At the end, ASEAN's continued

commitment to strategic autonomy and a rules-based order offers a framework for shaping a more balanced and cooperative regional order.

In conclusion, China's success in realizing the CSFM will depend on its ability to harmonize its economic ambitions with ASEAN's core values of sovereignty, equity, and inclusivity. By fostering mutual respect and embracing transparency, China has the opportunity to strengthen its partnership with ASEAN, contributing to a future that is prosperous, peaceful, and cooperative for both sides. The path forward lies in the effective integration of these principles into the broader ASEAN-China agenda, ensuring that the CSFM evolves as a meaningful framework for shared growth and regional stability.

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