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## **China and Asean: Roadmap to future**

***They need to strengthen and deepen their strategic partnership in all fields***

**By TOMMY KOH, RODOLFO SEVERINO AND JUSUF WANANDI**

THE leaders of China and the 10-member Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean) are holding a summit meeting today in Kuala Lumpur.

A report by the Asean-China Eminent Persons Group (EPG) is to be submitted to this summit. The establishment of the group was proposed by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao at the Asean-China Summit held in Vientiane, Laos, on Nov 29 last year.

The EPG consists of one representative from each of the 11 countries and is co-chaired by Musa Hitam, former deputy prime minister of Malaysia, and Qian Qichen, China's former deputy premier.

The report makes an assessment of the relations between China and Asean in the past 15 years and proposes a new vision and roadmap for the next 15 years.

Does China aspire to be the regional hegemon? The answer by our Chinese colleague is 'no'.

Will China seek to re-impose the tributary system on South-east Asia? The answer is again negative.

### **Well-timed initiatives**

We are assured that China will treat the countries of South-east Asia on terms of equality, mutual respect and good neighbourliness.

Does China seek to make South-east Asia its sphere of influence? Is China seeking to exclude the other major powers, especially the United States, from the region?

The report makes it clear that while Asean and China will deepen and strengthen their strategic relationship, they will adopt 'an open and inclusive approach' in promoting regional peace and security and Asean will continue to strengthen its linkages with other dialogue partners, including the US, Japan, India and the European Union.

In other words, while Asean wishes to have the best possible relations with China, the grouping acknowledges that there are other stakeholders in South-east Asia and will cooperate with all the stakeholders to promote regional peace and security.

It was not so many years ago when relations between China and South-east Asia were often troubled.

In contrast, China's relations with the region today are solid, substantive and largely trouble-free.

How has China succeeded in turning the relationship around? How has it won the friendship and support of the region? The answer is that China has been courting the

region with a series of well-timed and well-received initiatives and achievements, including:

- ◆ becoming a dialogue partner of Asean in 1996;
- ◆ signing with Asean a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea in 2002;
- ◆ offering Asean a free trade agreement in November 2002;
- ◆ acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South-east Asia in 2003;
- ◆ signing an agreement with Asean on trade in goods and one on a dispute settlement mechanism in 2004;
- ◆ growing the two-way trade to over US\$100 billion in 2004;
- ◆ showing Asean respect by sending China's President, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister to attend the relevant Asean meetings.

### **Essential component**

Both China and Asean have much at stake in their relationship.

For China, a successful relationship with South-east Asia is the best proof of China's doctrine that its rise will be peaceful and non-threatening.

For Asean, a successful relationship with China will enable the countries of South-east Asia to benefit from the growing prosperity of China.

It is also an essential component of Asean's grand strategy of building an East Asia community by linking and gradually integrating the economies of South-east Asia, North-east Asia, South Asia and Australia and New Zealand.

The EPG report recommends the strengthening and deepening of the Asean-China strategic partnership in all fields, with special emphasis on economic, political-security, social and cultural cooperation.

The following are some of the concrete suggestions:

- ◆ accelerate the early conclusion of the agreements on services and investment under the Asean-China Free Trade Area Negotiations and enhance cooperation in infrastructure, transport, communications, agriculture and energy;
- ◆ establish an Asean-China centre in Beijing to promote trade, investment, tourism, education and cultural cooperation;
- ◆ strengthen cooperation in maritime security, illegal trafficking, terrorism, transnational crimes and disaster relief and management;
- ◆ establish an Asean-China Foundation and launch a prestigious scholarship programme to promote the exchange of talented post-graduate students, post-doctoral fellows and young professors;
- ◆ enhance cooperation in environmental protection with a special emphasis on the sustainable use of natural resources, the reduction of air pollution and the better management of towns and cities.

The rapid growth of Asean-China relations has been a force for peace and stability in East Asia.

Asean and China are open to the world and wish to integrate their economies into the global economy.

In this way, their bilateral relationship has not only benefited their countries and peoples but also contributed to world peace and prosperity.

*The authors are the EPG members for Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia.*

*This essay represents their personal views.*

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