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China’s Southeast Asian Charm Offensive: Is It Working?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- China has embarked on another round of “charm offensive” in Southeast Asia. President Xi Jinping chose Myanmar for his first overseas trip this year.
- With Covid-19 momentarily disrupting official travel, Beijing has relied on a combination of traditional and digital platforms to reach out to Southeast Asia.
- In recent weeks, senior Chinese officials have stepped up their visits to Southeast Asia amid worsening US-China relations. In these visits, China reiterated its commitment to provide Covid-19 assistance, keep supply chains open and establish fast lanes. It also pressed for progress on signature infrastructure and development projects.
- Beijing is trying to prevent Southeast Asia from veering too close to the United States. At the very least, it prefers Southeast Asia to stay neutral.
- China’s latest overtures have had mixed results. While Southeast Asia value diversification in their external relations, they are increasingly concerned with China’s actions in the South China Sea.

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THE “CHARM OFFENSIVE” IN CONTEXT

There has been a flurry of diplomatic activities involving senior Chinese officials to Southeast Asia in recent weeks. Beijing appears to be developing its ties with Southeast Asia at a time when its relations with the United States have hit the rocks. Most notably, Yang Jiechi, Politburo member and Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs,¹ visited Singapore and Myanmar within a short span of two weeks. Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe also conducted a whirlwind tour of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and The Philippines. Wei’s visit coincided with a series of ASEAN-related meetings that saw US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo calling on ASEAN countries to act against China’s actions in the South China Sea.

Beijing’s forays into Southeast Asia can be viewed as part of China’s “charm offensive”, a term frequently used to describe China-Southeast Asia relations in the 2000s. This paper examines China’s foreign policy towards Southeast Asia since the start of the year by examining the significance of Yang’s and other Chinese leaders’ and senior officials’ forays into the region.

China’s relations with Southeast Asia can be broadly divided into a number of distinct phases since World War II. In the 1950s and 1960s, China and the non-communist Southeast Asian countries were in opposing camps, each exhibiting a high degree of suspicion and distrust towards the other. The latter was also facing serious internal communist insurgencies or subversive movements supported by China. Furthermore, when ASEAN was formed in 1967, China’s media lambasted the original five founding members as “US lackeys”, and viewed ASEAN as a “counter-revolutionary alliance”, and even as a “military alliance directed specifically against China”.²

Relations improved in the mid-1970s, when first Malaysia (in May 1974), then The Philippines (in June 1975) and Thailand (in July 1975) established diplomatic ties with China.³ This improvement was the result of changes in the strategic environment, namely, the worsening relationship between China and then Soviet Union (leading to the 1969 clash along the Ussuri River) and the US-China détente in the early 1970s. These two key developments drove China to improve relations with Southeast Asia.

China-ASEAN relations improved further in the 1990s when China was invited as a guest to the 36th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur, and it eventually became a dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1996. Nevertheless, the period that saw China-ASEAN ties really picking up momentum was in the 2000s when a number of milestones were achieved.

These included China’s proposal for a free trade area (FTA) with ASEAN in 2000 to allay ASEAN’s concern that investments would be diverted away from ASEAN with China’s WTO entry (which occurred in 2001). China and ASEAN signed the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation in November 2002, which provided a basis for ASEAN and China to negotiate further agreements leading towards the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) in January 2010. Other firsts included China being in 2003 the first dialogue partner to accede to ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and the first nuclear weapon state to indicate its willingness to accede to ASEAN’s Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ). China and ASEAN upgraded their relationship to a strategic partnership in 2003. During the 2000s, there was a view that Beijing was the most active among ASEAN’s dialogue partners in coming up with ideas

and initiatives to collaborate with ASEAN.⁴ The term “charm offensive” was used then to describe a China adept at building ties with Southeast Asia, leaving other ASEAN dialogue partners virtually playing catch-up.⁵

However, a turning point in the “charm offensive” occurred in 2009 when Beijing made public its infamous nine-dash line map that not only put China at loggerheads with the four ASEAN claimant states but also led to the internationalization of the South China Sea issue by bringing into the game other key players, mainly the United States.⁶ An oft-cited example was the 2010 ASEAN ARF in Hanoi, when the Chinese delegation was irate with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s assertion that Washington had a “national interest” in the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Then Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi reportedly warned “outside powers” to stay out of the area and in a veiled warning to his ASEAN counterparts remarked that “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact”.⁷

Since then, China’s relations with its Asian neighbours have been occasionally dogged by territorial and maritime disputes. There is the ongoing tussle with Japan over the Senkaku Islands (or Diaoyudao in Chinese) that began with the nationalization issue in 2012. China’s building of artificial islands in the South China Sea from December 2013 to October 2015 further turned the spotlight on Beijing’s differences with the ASEAN claimant states in this area.⁸ More recently, China stepped up oil and gas exploration in the EEZs of ASEAN claimant states.⁹ Although the term “charm offensive” is now less used, it does crop up whenever China is noted to be trying to improve ties with these countries, and especially after low points in their relations.¹⁰

TRADITIONAL AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Since the beginning of 2020, China has been making a concerted effort to keep its ties with Southeast Asia stable amid its own worsening ties with the United States and other key countries. Covid-19 imposed constraints on physical travel globally, and drove China to adopt a combination of traditional and digital tools to reach out to Southeast Asia.

A) High-level Bilateral Visits

The foremost indicator of China’s emphasis in its foreign policy for any particular year can be gleaned from the overseas visits of its leaders. Xi’s visit to Myanmar in January 2020 is therefore significant for a number of reasons. First, this was Xi’s first overseas visit, indicating that China’s focus this year is on strengthening ties with Southeast Asia in general and with Myanmar in particular, especially since this year marks the 70th anniversary of China-Myanmar relations. Second, it was the first state visit to Myanmar made by a Chinese president in 19 years.¹¹ Third, Xi’s trip to Myanmar was a single-country visit, deviating from the usual norm of combining a few countries in one trip.¹²

Underscoring the importance of China-Myanmar ties, Yang Jiechi visited Myanmar in September 2020.¹³ This was Yang’s second trip to Myanmar, having accompanied Xi on his state visit earlier in the year. During his second trip, Yang reaffirmed the consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries in January 2020 to build a “China-Myanmar community with a shared future” and to implement key cooperation projects under the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor programme.¹⁴

The other Southeast Asian country that Yang has visited so far this year is Singapore.¹⁵ To date, Yang is the most senior-level official from China to visit Singapore to mark the 30th anniversary of relations. Later in the year, the more senior Han Zheng, who is executive vice premier and politburo standing committee member, is expected to meet his Singapore counterpart Mr Heng Swee Keat for the Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation, a high-level platform that oversees collaboration between the two countries.

More recently, Defence Minister Wei Fenghe conducted a whirlwind tour of Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and The Philippines in 7-11 September 2020. Wei's visit coincided with a series of ASEAN-related meetings which saw US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo calling on ASEAN to go beyond words and to act against China's 'bullying' in the South China Sea.¹⁶ During his visit to Southeast Asia, Wei stressed China's willingness to work with these countries and ASEAN to promote maritime cooperation, and to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea.¹⁷ As the countries Wei visited all have some form of disagreement with China in the South China Sea, he attempted to allay their concerns, and more importantly, to persuade them from veering too close to the United States.

Separately, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Vietnamese counterpart Pham Binh Minh in Dongxing, China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, in August 2020 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the demarcation of the China-Vietnam land boundary. Beijing sought to reinforce the message that China and individual Southeast Asian countries were capable of resolving disputes between themselves without outside interference (read as "the United States").¹⁸ This is similar in emphasis to the 2014 Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) during which President Xi called on Asian countries to take charge of their own affairs.¹⁹

B) *Phone Diplomacy*

With Covid-19 restricting travel, China has settled for good old phone-and-letter diplomacy. Among the ASEAN countries, Xi spoke the most with Indonesian President Jokowi, i.e. a total of three times in February, April and September (see **Table 1**). Beijing portrayed the call in February, initiated by Jokowi, as Indonesia expressing support for China's fight against Covid-19. The other two calls, in April and September, were initiated by Xi to convey China's commitment to render Covid-19 assistance to Indonesia and to push ahead with key BRI projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail. The frequency of the calls was likely related to the 70th anniversary of relations between the two countries and also because Indonesia is regarded as the most important country in ASEAN by China.

Table 1: President Xi Jinping’s Phone Calls with Southeast Asian Leaders
(Jan-September 2020 - in alphabetical order by country)

<u>Country</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
Brunei	-	No reported phone calls involving Xi and Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah of Brunei. ²⁰
Cambodia	-	No reported phone calls involving Xi and Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia. ²¹
Laos	3 Apr	Thanking Laos’ General Secretary and President Bounnhang Vorachit for Laos’ earlier help to China to fight Covid-19, Xi pledges China’s continued support to Laos to do likewise. Xi calls for further progress on key projects such as the China-Laos Railway.
Indonesia (70 th anniversary)	12 Feb	Xi thanks President Widodo for the call and expresses confidence that China will win fight against Covid-19.
	2 Apr	Xi expresses China’s readiness to provide support and assistance to Indonesia to fight Covid-19.
	1 Sep	Xi and Jokowi speaks about Covid-19 cooperation, and the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail.
Malaysia	14 Feb	Xi appreciates then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir for making the call, and for Malaysia’s support to China in fighting Covid-19.
Myanmar (70 th anniversary)	20 May	Xi speaks with Myanmar President U Win Myint and reiterates the importance of building a China-Myanmar community with a shared future, and for greater progress in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor projects.
Philippines (45 th anniversary)	11 Jun	Xi pledges continued support to The Philippines to overcome the Covid-19 threat. Philippine President Duterte welcomes Xi’s pledge to make the Covid-19 vaccine a global public good.
Singapore (30 th anniversary)	14 Jul	Xi congratulates Singapore Prime Minister Lee on the latter’s election victory. They also speak on Covid-19 cooperation, the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor, and the travel bubble between the two countries.
Thailand (45 th anniversary)	14 Jul	Xi and Thai Prime Minister Prayut discusses cooperation in fighting Covid-19 and on the China-Thailand Railway.
Vietnam (70 th anniversary)	16 Jan	At Vietnam’s request, Xi and Vietnam’s General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong exchange greetings ahead of the Spring Festival and the 70 th anniversary of relations. Xi says the two countries should “properly handle and solve differences with the larger picture in mind”.

Source: Various public sources

Xi also spoke to the leaders of the other two countries with whom China is celebrating 70 years of diplomatic relations this year, i.e. Myanmar and Vietnam. In May 2020, President Xi reiterated to Myanmar President U Win Myint the importance of building the “China-Myanmar community with a shared future” and making further progress on the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor projects. In January 2020, Xi exchanged greetings with Vietnam’s General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong ahead of the Lunar New Year celebrations.

Later in the year, in August 2020, Xi conveyed a condolence letter to Trong upon the passing of former Vietnamese General Secretary Le Kha Phieu.²² Yang Jiechi further visited the Vietnamese Embassy in Beijing to sign the condolence book on Phieu's passing.²³

With regards to The Philippines and Thailand, where China is celebrating the 45th anniversary of relations, Xi also spoke with the leaders of these two countries. Apart from taking about continued cooperation to fight Covid-19, Xi pressed for further progress on the China-Thai Railway in his conversation with General Prayut. Xi also spoke with Philippine President Duterte where the latter welcomed Xi's pledge at the World Health Assembly in May 2020 to make the Covid-19 vaccine a "global public good".²⁴

Xi called Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to congratulate him on his election victory in July 2020. The two leaders also agreed to deepen Belt and Road cooperation through the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor (ILSTC), a multi-modal land-sea link connecting Chongqing to the Guangxi port of Qinzhou, and from there to the rest of Southeast Asia and other parts of the world.

Even with Southeast Asian countries where there are no important anniversaries regarding ties with China this year, Beijing maintained its outreach. In April 2020, Xi spoke with Laos' General Secretary and President Bounnhang Vorachit to pledge China's continued support to Laos to fight Covid-19. Xi called for further progress on key projects such as the China-Laos Railway.

C) *Digital Diplomacy*

China has also been capitalizing on the use of digital diplomacy to extend its reach to Southeast Asia. Following the last physical meeting of the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Vientiane in February 2020, China and ASEAN moved on to virtual meetings such as the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Covid-19 (held in April 2020 and in which China's Premier Li Keqiang participated), and ASEAN-related meetings such as with China and the Plus Three countries (held in September 2020 with Foreign Minister Wang Yi representing China). In addition, working-level health experts from China and ASEAN have also held video conferences (in February and March 2020) to share experiences on Covid-19 testing, contact tracing, and prevention and control.

SOME KEY THRUSTS

Beijing's outreach to Southeast Asia has a few key thrusts. Foremost among them is its commitment to continue to render Covid-19 assistance.²⁵ China has also dispatched civilian and military medical teams to a number of Southeast Asian countries.²⁶ It has further promised to make the Covid-19 vaccine available to Southeast Asia, once that has been developed.

At the 3rd Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders' Meeting in August 2020, Premier Li Keqiang informed his counterparts from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam that once the Covid-19 vaccine was developed and deployed in China, it would be provided to the Mekong countries on a priority basis.²⁷ China has also indicated that it would give priority to vaccine distribution in The Philippines.²⁸ Malaysia is looking to China as a vaccine source as well.²⁹ Among the ASEAN countries, Indonesia appears to be the most

involved with China on this front; the two countries started Phase III clinical trials in Bandung in August 2020 and a leading Chinese pharmaceutical company has committed to provide bulk vaccine to its Indonesian counterpart until end 2021.³⁰

Another thrust is for China to establish “fast lane” or green channels for essential business and official travels with Southeast Asia. The first Southeast Asian country that China has established such an arrangement with is Singapore (on 8 June 2020).³¹ This was followed later by Myanmar (15 June 2020),³² Thailand (1 July 2020),³³ Brunei (4 August 2020),³⁴ Indonesia (20 August 2020),³⁵ and Vietnam (15 September 2020).³⁶ On 3 September, Beijing took the further step of resuming international flights to countries such as Cambodia and Thailand which have a low number of imported Covid-19 cases.³⁷ China has also stressed the importance of keeping global industrial and supply chains open to restore the growth momentum of the world economy.³⁸

Beijing’s other thrust is to press on with key BRI projects.³⁹ This is evident in Xi’s conversations with his ASEAN counterparts where specific projects such as the China-Laos Railway, the China-Thailand Railway, the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor projects (which refer to the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone, the Myanmar-China Border Economic Cooperation Zones, and the new urban development of Yangon City) were highlighted. Further progress on these projects would show that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) remains on track despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the 3rd Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Leaders’ Meeting, Premier Li Keqiang further proposed synergizing the LMC with the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor (ILSTC)⁴⁰ so that more products from western China can reach Southeast Asia and vice versa, by utilizing different modes of transport such as river, rail, land and sea links. The objective is to reduce transaction costs for China and Southeast Asian businesses in bringing their goods to market. In short, Beijing is stepping up efforts to integrate its economy with Southeast Asia via key infrastructure projects and links.

Finally, Beijing’s preference is for Southeast Asia to at least stay neutral and not take the side of the United States against China.⁴¹ A recent *Global Times* article urges Vietnam not to over-play the “ultra-nationalistic” card against China, especially in terms of their differences over the South China Sea. This was because ultra-nationalism could provide a rallying call for forces within Vietnam opposed to the Communist Party of Vietnam. The article asserts that the United States seeks to stoke Vietnam’s nationalism against China, and that would pose a threat to Vietnam’s long-term political stability, since anti-system forces would in the process be emboldened as well.⁴² In other words, Vietnam had to guard against doing anything that would backfire.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Beijing’s focus on strengthening ties with Southeast Asia shows some urgency due to the deterioration of China’s relations with the United States and other key partners. To some extent, one may term this a “charm offensive” launched by China to woo Southeast Asia. Beijing’s image in other parts of the world has been badly impacted in recent times, and Southeast Asian countries, especially the claimant states, are increasingly concerned with China’s assertive, and even aggressive, moves in their EEZs in the South China Sea.

To varying degrees, the Southeast Asian countries recognise the importance of diversification in their external relations. On the topic of Covid-19 vaccine for example, they are already sourcing for different suppliers. Malaysia's Minister for Science, Technology and Innovation Khairy Jamaluddin said that Malaysia was not only depending on China for the vaccine but was also considering other manufacturers.⁴³ Even President Duterte, who has been critical of Western pharmaceutical companies, is open to importing vaccines from Russia as well, provided that their vaccines are "as good as any other on the market".⁴⁴

To be sure, Southeast Asia is no stranger to China's wolf warrior diplomacy, although it is other parts of the world that have borne the brunt of this so far. It was several years ago, in September 2015, when then Chinese Ambassador Huang Huikang to Malaysia, while visiting Kuala Lumpur's Petaling Street (Chinatown), reportedly said that China would "not sit by idly" should there be an "infringement on China's national interests, violations of legal rights and interests of Chinese citizens and businesses which may damage the friendly relationship" between China and Malaysia. Huang's remarks were regarded by an unnamed Malaysian official as interfering in Malaysia's domestic affairs.⁴⁵

For now, there is really no need for China to exercise any wolf-warrior diplomacy in Southeast Asia. The latter can in fact expect a softer and lighter touch in Beijing's diplomatic outreach, akin to the actions of the current Chinese Ambassador to Malaysia Bai Tian who took to Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) in July 2020 to promote Malaysia's famous durians, especially the Musang King, in a 90-second long video. This durian diplomacy seemed to warm the hearts of some Malaysians who saw it as official enabling of the thorny fruit to gain a larger market share in China.⁴⁶

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- ¹ The Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, created in 2018, gives the Chinese Communist Party greater authority over how China's foreign policy is conducted. The Central Commission is headed by General Secretary Xi Jinping, with Yang Jiechi as director of the office.
- ² "Meeting in Bangkok: Puny Counter-Revolutionary Alliance", *Peking Review*, vol. 10, no. 34, August 18, 1967.
- ³ Mr Lee Kuan Yew's first visit to China as prime minister was made in 1976. However, Singapore did not establish diplomatic ties with China until Indonesia had first done so. This was in order to assuage the concerns of its immediate neighbours that Singapore was a third China.
- ⁴ Joshua Kurlantzick, *China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia*, Current History, September 2006, pp. 270-276, available at https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kurlantzick_SoutheastAsia_China.pdf. See also Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (USA: Yale University Press, 2007).
- "China's charm offensive in Southeast Asia", *The New York Times*, 8 November 2003, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/08/opinion/IHT-asiapacific-chinas-charm-offensive-in-southeast-asia.html>.
- ⁵ From the author's earlier conversations with Chinese contacts.
- ⁶ "The 2009 claims that changed the dynamics in the South China Sea", *Straits Times*, 12 July 2016, at <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/the-2009-claims-that-changed-dynamics-in-the-s-china-sea>.
- ⁷ "U.S. takes a tougher tone with China", *Washington Post*, 30 July 2010, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/29/AR2010072906416.html>; "The Belligerents", *The New Republic*, 27 January 2011, at

<https://newrepublic.com/article/82211/china-foreign-policy>; and, Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), p. 79. The Chinese side acknowledged that this episode took place but asserted that this gave then Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi the opportunity to refute fallacies on the South China Sea issue. See “Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi Refutes Fallacies on the South China Sea Issue”, China’s Foreign Ministry, 26 July 2010, at <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t719460.htm>.

⁸ “China’s Island Building in the South China Sea: Damage to the Marine Environment, Implications, and International Law”, US Economic and Security Review Commission, 4 December 2016, at <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-island-building-south-china-sea-damage-marine-environment-implications-and#:~:text=From%20December%202013%20to%20October,of%20the%20South%20China%20Sea>.

⁹ “U.S. ‘deeply concerned’ by China’s interference in Vietnam oil and gas activity”, Reuters, 22 August 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-vietnam-china/u-s-deeply-concerned-by-chinas-interference-in-vietnam-oil-and-gas-activity-idUSKCN1VC1T3>.

¹⁰ “Why China’s East Asian charm offensive will need more than sweet talk and trade deals to succeed”, South China Morning Post, 20 November 2018, at <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/united-states/article/2174059/why-chinas-east-asian-charm-offensive-will>.

¹¹ The last state visit to Myanmar was by Chinese President Jiang Zemin in 2001.

¹² For instance, Xi’s last overseas trip in 2019 was to Greece for a state visit, from where he flew to Brazil to attend the 11th BRICS summit in Brasilia. See “Chinese president arrives in Greece for state visit”, Xinhuanet, 11 November 2019, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/11/c_1210348606.htm.

¹³ Yang’s visit to Myanmar was not a single-country trip. He visited Spain and Greece from 1-4 September 2020.

¹⁴ Yang Jiechi fangwen miandian (Yang Jiechi visits Myanmar), Xinhuanet, 2 September 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-09/02/c_1126443874.htm. The flagship cooperation projects include the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone, the Myanmar-China Border Economic Cooperation Zones, and the new urban development of Yangon City as well as key infrastructure projects of connectivity such as roads, railways, electric power and energy. See also “JOINT STATEMENT BETWEEN MYANMAR-CHINA ISSUED ON THE OCCASION OF THE STATE VISIT OF H.E. MR. XI JINPING, PRESIDENT OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA TO THE REPUBLIC OF THE UNION OF MYANMAR”, Myanmar’s Foreign Ministry, 18 January 2020.

¹⁵ Yang Jiechi first visited Singapore, then South Korea, in 19-22 August 2020.

¹⁶ “Mike Pompeo asks ASEAN states not to let China ‘walk over us’”, Japan Times, 10 September 2020, at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/09/10/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/pompeo-asean-china-walk-over-us/>.

¹⁷ Malaixiya zhongli mu xi ding huijian wei fenghe (Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin meets Wei Fenghe), Xinhuanet, 7 September 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-09/07/c_1126464028.htm; Wei fenghe tong yindunixiya guofang buzhang juxing huitan (Wei Fenghe and Indonesian Defence Minister hold talks), Xinhuanet, 8 September 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-09/08/c_1126469043.htm; Wenlai sudan ha san na er huijian wei fenghe (Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah meets Wei Fenghe), Xinhuanet, 9 September 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-09/09/c_1126474133.htm.

¹⁸ “Land border pact shows China, Vietnam can ‘solve maritime issues without external intervention’”, Global Times, 23 August 2020, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1198622.shtml>.

¹⁹ At the 2014 CICA, President Xi said that “it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia. The people of Asia have the capability and wisdom to achieve peace and stability in the region through enhanced cooperation”. See

“New Asian Security Concept For New Progress in Security Cooperation”, China’s Foreign Ministry, 21 May 2014, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1159951.shtml.

²⁰ Although there are no reported phone calls between President Xi Jinping and Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah of Brunei, Beijing has rendered Covid-19 assistance to Brunei.

²¹ Although there were no reported phone calls between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Hun Sen, relations between the two countries are close. Prime Minister Hun Sen visited Beijing in February 2020 at the height of the Covid-19 threat to lend support to Beijing’s fight against the pandemic.

²² Xi Jinping similarly conveyed his condolences to Nguyen Phu Trong (who is both the general secretary and president) upon the passing of former Vietnamese President Le Duc Anh in April 2019. See “Foreign leaders extend condolences to Vietnam over former President’s death”, Nhan Dan, 29 April 2019, at <https://en.nhandan.org.vn/politics/external-relations/item/7416502-foreign-leaders-extend-condolences-to-vietnam-over-former-president's-death.html>.

²³ Yang Jiechi Visits the Vietnamese Embassy in China to Mourn the Passing Away of Le Kha Phieu, Former General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), China’s Foreign Ministry, 14 August 2020, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1807072.shtml. In October 2018, when former General Secretary Do Muoi passed away, Yang Jiechi also visited the Vietnamese Embassy in Beijing to sign the condolence book. See “Senior Chinese official visits Vietnamese embassy to mourn late former party leader Do Muoi”, Global Times, 6 October 2018, at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1121834.shtml>.

²⁴ “Chinese vaccines will be made global public good, says Xi”, CGTN, 19 May 2020, at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-19/Chinese-vaccines-will-be-made-global-public-good-says-Xi-QCpFSGIL2g/index.html>.

²⁵ Some observers have noted that US emergency health and humanitarian assistance to ASEAN member states during Covid-19 has been paltry. See William Choong, “US regional leadership: A shot across the bow”, theinterpreter, 7 April 2020, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/us-regional-leadership-shot-across-bow>.

²⁶ Lye Liang Fook, China’s COVID-19 Assistance to Southeast Asia: Uninterrupted Aid amid Global Uncertainties, ISEAS Perspective No. 58, 4 June 2020, at https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_58.pdf.

²⁷ Li Keqiang chuxi lancangjiang-meigonghe hezuo di san ci lingdao ren huiyi shi qiangdiao tuidong ci quyue hezuo tuozhan shenhua dazao shui ziyuan hezuo xin liangdian (Li Keqiang attended the Third Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders’ Meeting and emphasized promoting the expansion and deepening of sub-regional cooperation and creating new highlights in water resources cooperation), Xinhuanet, 24 August 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-08/24/c_1126407710.htm.

²⁸ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference, China’s Foreign Ministry, 28 July 2020, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1801757.shtml.

²⁹ Malaysia in talks with China over potential MOU for early access to COVID-19 vaccine: Science and technology minister, CNA, 5 August 2020, at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-china-covid-19-vaccine-mou-khairi-jamaluddin-12993038>.

³⁰ “Indonesia to start phase III clinical trials of Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine on Tuesday”, The Jakarta Post, 7 August 2020, at <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/08/07/indonesia-to-start-phase-iii-clinical-trials-of-sinovac-covid-19-vaccine-on-tuesday.html>. In addition, in August 2020, an agreement was reached between Sinovac Biotech Ltd, a leading provider of biopharmaceutical products in China, and PT Bio Farma, a leading biopharmaceutical company in Indonesia, for the former to supply bulk vaccine to enable the latter to produce at least 40 million doses of CoronaVac in Indonesia before March 2021; and after March 2021, Sinovac will continue to supply the required quantity of the bulk vaccine until end 2021. See “Sinovac Signs Agreement with Bio Farma Indonesia for COVID-19 Vaccine Cooperation”, Businesswire, 25 August 2020,

at <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20200825005451/en/Sinovac-Signs-Agreement-Bio-Farma-Indonesia-COVID-19>.

³¹ “China confirms launch of fast lane arrangement with Singapore to facilitate travel”, Xinhuanet, 10 June 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/10/c_139127134.htm.

³² “China, Myanmar establish fast track for essential personnel”, China Daily, 15 June 2020, at <https://www.chinadailyasia.com/article/133859>.

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³⁴ “Brunei, Chinese mainland resume direct flights after COVID-19 situation under control”, Xinhuanet, 4 August 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/04/c_139264816.htm.

³⁵ This was formally announced during the visit of Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi to Hainan where she met her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. Chinese state media pointed out that Retno was the first foreign minister to visit China since the pandemic began. See “China, Indonesia launch “fast-lane” to revive economy from COVID-19”, CGTN, 21 August 2020, at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-08-20/China-to-work-with-Indonesia-to-safeguard-peace-in-South-China-Sea-T7kaxriAgg/index.html>.

³⁶ “Vietnam to soon resume flights to China, Cambodia, Laos and Taiwan”, Hanoi Times, 4 September 2020, at <http://hanoitimes.vn/vietnam-to-soon-resume-flights-to-china-cambodia-laos-and-taiwan-314095.html>.

³⁷ Other countries to which China resumed international flights on 3 September included Pakistan in Asia; Greece, Denmark, Austria and Sweden in Europe; and Canada in North America. See “Beijing resumes direct international flights”, Global Times, 2 September 2020, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1199705.shtml>.

³⁸ For instance, on 2 July 2020, China joined the ministerial statement on ensuring supply chain connectivity amidst the Covid-19 situation. Apart from China, the other countries that were behind the statement included Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Laos, Myanmar, Nauru, New Zealand, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, and Uruguay. This ministerial statement was initiated by Singapore and New Zealand in March 2020. See “SINGAPORE WELCOMES NEW MEMBERS TO JOINT MINISTERIAL STATEMENT ON ENSURING SUPPLY CHAIN CONNECTIVITY AMIDST THE COVID-19 SITUATION”, Singapore’s Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2 July 2020, at <https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2020/07/2-Jul---Singapore-Welcomes-New-Members-to-Joint-Ministerial--Statement-on-Supply-Chain-Connect.pdf>.

³⁹ A recent study by Neil Thomas, a Senior Research Associate at MacroPolo, the in-house Think Tank of the Paulson Institute, indicates that the term BRI has become far less prominent in Chinese state media in 2020 compared to previous years. See Neil Thomas’s Twitter, at <https://twitter.com/neilthomas123/status/1305907234858246145?s=21>.

⁴⁰ Singapore and China signed an MOU in November 2018 to develop the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor (ILSTC) under the China-Singapore (Chongqing) Demonstrative Initiative on Strategic Connectivity, the third government-to-government project between the two countries. See “MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING ON THE NEW INTERNATIONAL LAND-SEA TRADE CORRIDOR UNDER THE CHINA-SINGAPORE (CHONGQING) DEMONSTRATION INITIATIVE ON STRATEGIC CONNECTIVITY”, Singapore’s Ministry of Trade and Industry, 12 November 2018, at <https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2018/11/Press-Release---MOU-on-the-CCI-ILSTC-12-Nov.pdf>.

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⁴² “Managing maritime disputes benefits Vietnam”, Global Times, 27 August 2020, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1199137.shtml>.

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⁴⁵ “Wisma Putra summons China envoy over Petaling Street visit”, Malaysiakini, 26 September 2015, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/313559>. Ambassador Huang’s comments came in the wake of anti-Chinese activities conducted by Malay right-wing groups in the Chinatown area of Kuala Lumpur.

⁴⁶ Zhongguo dashi dou yin ‘dai huo’ mao shanwang liulian malaixiya gejie ‘dian zan’ (Chinese ambassador uses TikTok to promote Musang King durian, various sectors in Malaysia express likes), Chinanews, 3 July 2020, at <https://m.chinanews.com/wap/detail/zw/gj/2020/07-03/9228804.shtml> and “China ambassador promotes Musang King”, The Star, 2 July 2020, at <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/07/02/china-ambassador-promotes-musang-king>.

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