

PERSPECTIVE

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Review of Foreign Minister Wang Yi's Visit to Southeast Asia in August 2023

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Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (R) meeting with visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Singapore on 11 August 2023. (Photo by Then Chih Wey/Xinhua) (Photo by Then Chih Wey / XINHUA / Xinhua via AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Wang Yi travelled to Singapore, Malaysia and Cambodia in his first foreign visit after his re-appointment as foreign minister, underscoring Beijing’s strong commitment to Southeast Asia by sustaining the tempo of high-level engagements.
- The visit was also possibly meant to highlight continuity—and absence of disruption—to China’s foreign relations and its Southeast Asia policy following Qin Gang’s removal as foreign minister.
- During his visit, Wang Yi sought to cultivate good relationships with new and next-generation Southeast Asian leaders, especially in Cambodia and Singapore, with a view to ensuring that the positive momentum in ties continues.
- Apart from strengthening China’s ties with the respective Southeast Asian countries, Wang Yi took the occasion to criticise the US’ policy on Taiwan and the South China Sea, as well as Washington’s export restrictions against China.
- Since Southeast Asia’s importance to Beijing has increased in light of US-China tensions, China may be trying to condition how Southeast Asia ought to behave. However, its efforts are undercut by Beijing’s aggressive moves in the South China Sea, its own long-arm jurisdiction through the set-up of overseas police stations, and its economic coercion against certain countries.
- For a longer-term sustainable relationship, China should appreciate that Southeast Asia has the “capability and wisdom” to do what is right, and this includes their strategic choice to be friends with all its key partners.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Singapore, Malaysia and Cambodia on 10-13 August 2023. His visit coincided with the 65th anniversary of China-Cambodia relations as well as the 10th anniversary of the China-Malaysia Strategic Comprehensive Partnership, and came on the heels of the upgrading of Singapore-China ties to an “All-Round High-Quality Future-Oriented Partnership” in March 2023.¹ This was also Wang Yi’s first foreign trip after his re-appointment as foreign minister, which went to demonstrate the high priority China gives to the region and the commitment it has to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian countries. The visit was also possibly meant to highlight continuity—and absence of disruption—to China’s foreign relations and its Southeast Asia policy following the removal of Qin Gang as foreign minister. Wang Yi is concurrently a politburo bureau member and Director of the Party’s Foreign Affairs Commission, which added further significance to his visit.

This Perspective examines China’s key objectives and messages during Wang Yi’s trip to the three Southeast Asian countries, and situates his visit in the broader context of China’s approach to Southeast Asia and the intensifying US-China strategic rivalry.

SOUTHEAST ASIA’S IMPORTANCE TO CHINA

Chinese leaders often refer to the Southeast Asian region or ASEAN as a “good neighbour, good partner and good friend”,² highlighting the region’s geographical proximity to China and Beijing’s willingness to strengthen ties with these countries. Southeast Asia is important to China for several reasons. The region comprises a diverse number of smaller states, with some of them, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar, sharing a land border with China. All of them want to grow their ties with China and Beijing is likewise keen to engage with a dynamic region of 680 million people. The ten ASEAN member countries collectively have become the largest trading partner for China since 2020 and a major recipient of Chinese foreign investment and development financing. Strategically, the region sits astride critical sea lanes of communication, namely, the Straits of Malacca and South China Sea (SCS), where a large proportion of China’s oil and gas, and other goods traverses. Furthermore, Southeast Asia is at the confluence of big power competition and its strategic importance to China has grown as US-China tensions continue to rise. Beijing has been continually strengthening ties with Southeast Asian countries to draw them closer and to prevent them from siding with the US against China.

The importance of Southeast Asia in China’s foreign policy is manifest in Beijing’s efforts to maintain annual high-level visits and diplomatic engagements with countries in the region. Wang Yi’s visit to Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore in August 2023 was therefore part of an increasingly regularised mechanism of China’s engagement with Southeast Asia. Despite all the travel restrictions and disruptions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Wang Yi had consistently prioritised Southeast Asia and paid official visits to all ASEAN countries in 2021 and 2022.

During his short stint as foreign minister, Qin Gang also focused on Southeast Asia in his travel calendar. He made Indonesia his first stop in his tour of the region in February 2023.³ Apart from meeting his Indonesian counterpart Retno Marsudi, Qin Gang visited the ASEAN

Secretariat in Jakarta where he urged ASEAN to maintain its “strategic independence”,⁴ similar to Beijing’s call on other countries to uphold “strategic autonomy”.⁵ Beijing views Indonesia as the most influential country in Southeast Asia and ASEAN, and therefore seeks good and stable ties with Jakarta. Moreover, as the current chair of ASEAN, Indonesia can help shape ASEAN’s relations with its dialogue partners, which include China.

At the leader’s level, Chinese President Xi Jinping made a state visit to Myanmar in January 2020, against the backdrop of the Trump administration taking tougher measures against China. It was the first time Xi toured a Southeast Asian country in his first overseas trip of the year as president.⁶ When Xi resumed his overseas travel post-Covid, Southeast Asia continued to be a key area of focus, and the region constituted one of the three foreign destinations Xi made in 2022. In November 2022, Xi attended the G20 Summit in Bali, then flew to Bangkok for the 29th APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting.⁷ This was Xi’s first visit to Thailand as president.⁸ Xi also invited the general secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party as the first foreign leader to visit China after the Chinese Communist Party’s 20th National Congress in October 2022.

Since the start of 2023, China has continued to build on its ties with Southeast Asia through high-level visit exchanges. When Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. travelled to China in January 2023, Chinese state media highlighted that this was his first bilateral visit to a non-ASEAN country.⁹ In February 2023, Cambodian Prime Minister (PM) Hun Sen was reportedly the first foreign leader to visit China after the Lunar New Year.¹⁰ Three years ago, Hun Sen was the first foreign leader to visit China when Beijing was scrambling to contain the Covid-19 outbreak. His visit was then perceived as a lending of support to Beijing’s effort to curb the pandemic spread and a demonstration of the “unbreakable friendship” and “mutual trust” between the two countries.¹¹ In March 2023, Singapore PM Lee Hsien Loong and Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim also visited China and spoke at the Bo’ao Forum for Asia in Hainan.

It is worthwhile to mention that Southeast Asia was among the largest recipients of Chinese Covid-19 vaccines in both donation and purchase.¹² They were also the early beneficiaries of Beijing’s relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions for outbound travel. In February 2023, China approved outbound group travel to seven Southeast Asian countries; namely, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, from a list of 20 countries.¹³ Brunei and Vietnam were added to this list in March 2023.¹⁴ Countries whom China had differences with or which had imposed travel restrictions on Chinese travellers such as the US, Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom, India, Japan and South Korea were only added to the list several months later in August 2023.¹⁵

KEY OBJECTIVES AND MESSAGES OF WANG YI’S SOUTHEAST ASIA TRIP

Cultivating relationships with new and next-generation Southeast Asian leaders

A key objective of Wang Yi’s trip was to strengthen political ties with existing and incoming leaders in Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore; these countries have recently been or are currently in the midst of leader transition. China has been consistently pragmatic and ideologically agnostic in building good relationships with the ruling elites in other countries. In Cambodia, apart from calling on King Norodom Sihamoni, Prime Minister (PM) Hun Sen, and Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) and Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn, Wang Yi met with

Hun Sen's son, Hun Manet, then prime minister-in-waiting, on 13 August 2023.¹⁶ Wang Yi was the first foreign leader that Hun Manet has met since his father announced that he was stepping down as prime minister. Earlier, in February 2023, Hun Manet had accompanied his father to call on Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing. China wants to ensure that the strong ties between China and Cambodia under Hun Sen would continue under Hun Manet as prime minister. The Chinese foreign ministry's readout of the visit hailed the "overwhelming victory of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) in the general election", which it said "has shown the right choice made by the Cambodian people and their trust in and support for CPP".¹⁷

In Malaysia, Wang Yi met Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim and his Malaysian counterpart Zambray Abdul Kadir. In a break from the diplomatic norm of meeting Malaysian leaders in Putrajaya, Wang Yi made the effort to travel to Penang to meet Anwar, who was campaigning in the state elections.¹⁸ During the meeting, Wang Yi highlighted that Anwar is "an old friend of the Chinese people", China is a "reliable and good friend of Malaysia", and that the two countries enjoy a "special and friendly relationship with robust bilateral cooperation".¹⁹

In Singapore, Wang Yi called on PM Lee Hsien Loong, Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and DPM Lawrence Wong who was referred to as the "leader of Singapore's fourth-generation leadership team".²⁰ Affirming the positive momentum in bilateral relations, Wang Yi expressed hope that China-Singapore relations will continue to be at the "forefront of China's relations with neighbouring countries".²¹ This remark casts the China-Singapore relationship positively, adopting an entirely different tone compared to 2016 when bilateral ties were at their lowest point. In a relevant development, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson in May 2023 commented that the remarks by DPM Wong on democracy at the Nikkei Forum was based on "Singapore's own successful practice" and "speaks to the aspirations of many countries". The same spokesperson added that China and Singapore have both found "democratic paths that suit them and have their own characteristics".²² By giving credit to Singapore's democratic path, Beijing is also simultaneously boosting its own political system's legitimacy and rejecting the monopoly of the Western liberal democratic model. It repudiates US attempts to forge closer partnerships with democratic countries through the Summit for Democracy of which two have been held so far.

Promoting China's regional cooperation agenda

Another thrust of Wang Yi's visit was to strengthen its regional cooperation agenda through various multilateral platforms. His visit can be viewed as part of diplomatic activities to commemorate the 20th anniversary of China's accession to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and the 10th anniversary of China's Belt and Road (BRI) Initiative, even though the BRI has had a mixed record since its launch, and official support for the initiative seems to have waned over time.²³ A key message arising from Wang Yi's visit was that countries in the region should cooperate even closer with China in the interest of peace, stability and development.

In the three Southeast Asian countries he visited, Wang Yi expressed China's commitment to engage ASEAN and maintain ASEAN centrality, which is a refrain in Chinese messaging towards the region.²⁴ There is a view that Wang Yi's visit was meant to shore up ASEAN ties ahead of the resumption of negotiations on a Code of Conduct in the SCS hosted by Manila in

August 2023.²⁵ While this may be true, one should not overestimate this point as the three Southeast Asian countries hold different positions on the SCS. As non-claimant states, Singapore takes a principled position that upholds international law in peaceful resolution of disputes while Cambodia is a loyal friend of China within ASEAN on the SCS issue. Malaysia, although a claimant state, prefers not to play up its differences with China over the SCS. Earlier in April 2023, PM Anwar Ibrahim invited domestic backlash when he told Chinese President Xi Jinping that Malaysia was prepared to negotiate with Beijing on its state energy company Petronas' exploration in the South China Sea,²⁶ thereby inadvertently acknowledging Beijing's claim over Malaysia's exclusive economic zones.

Apart from ASEAN, China is keen to be part of other regional arrangements where it can play a role and remain influential. In particular, Beijing wants to be a member of the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) first signed by Singapore, Chile and New Zealand in June 2020 to promote secure digital trade. This topic was raised in Wang Yi's discussion with DPM Wong in Singapore. DPM Wong reportedly informed Wang Yi that Singapore welcomed China's application in accordance with the rules and procedures of the agreement.²⁷ DPM Wong further expressed Singapore's in-principle support for China joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). However, whether China can eventually become a member of DEPA or CPTPP will depend on whether it can meet the criteria of membership as well as obtain the necessary support of current members of these two organisations.²⁸

The BRI was mentioned in Wang Yi's visits to Malaysia and Cambodia as these two countries host several BRI projects. These include the Sihanoukville port and Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone in Cambodia and the East Coast Railway Line as well as the twin parks, namely, the Kuantan Industrial Park and Qinzhou Industrial Park, in Malaysia which are often touted as examples of successful collaboration under China's BRI. However, it is important to note that these projects have experienced delays, were affected by Covid-19 lockdowns, and are still works in progress. Nevertheless, as a global-wide initiative launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping with great fanfare in 2013, Beijing is likely to press ahead with BRI. In fact, China is preparing to host the 3rd Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in October 2023.

Criticising the United States

In a departure from its usual diplomatic practice, Wang Yi specifically criticised the US while in Singapore. Usually, in a bilateral visit, China would focus on issues of common interest, and not bring in third parties. And even if third parties are mentioned, they are normally implicitly, not explicitly, referred to. However, in his meeting with PM Lee Hsien Loong, Wang Yi reportedly lashed out at the US for "conniving and supporting the Taiwan independence forces" and "violating China's red line".²⁹ He further criticised Washington for "coercing other countries to engage in unilateral protectionism against China", a reference to how other countries had imposed export restrictions on sensitive technologies to China. In his view, these actions demonstrated that the US had become the "biggest unstable factor in the world today".³⁰

China appears to be responding in kind as US leaders have also criticised Beijing on numerous occasions in public during their visits to other countries.

The US was not mentioned in Chinese foreign ministry's readouts on Wang Yi's discussions with PM Anwar Ibrahim and PM Hun Sen.³¹ It would appear that the readout's highlight of Wang Yi's criticism of the US while he was in Singapore was not only aimed at Washington but could also be meant as a warning to Singapore, given that the latter is often seen as a reliable partner of the US in Southeast Asia. In the past, Singapore has borne the brunt of Beijing's criticism when it was seen as standing with the US against China.³² This happened when Singapore reiterated the importance of freedom of navigation and a rules-based international order in 2016. That was the year when the arbitral tribunal ruled in Manila's favour in the arbitration case on the SCS, which China then dismissed as "a piece of waste paper".

US behaviour in the SCS was also a subject of Wang Yi's criticism during his visit. In a statement issued by China's foreign ministry, Wang Yi held Washington responsible for continuing to "stir up trouble" in the SCS by using the Second Thomas Shoal issue to pit China against the Philippines. He reiterated China's willingness to resolve existing disputes with the Philippines through bilateral dialogue and added that the region has the "capability and wisdom" to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea.³³ In other words, from China's perspective, extra-regional powers like the US has no role to play on this issue.

CONCLUSION

Wang Yi's Southeast Asian tour took place against the backdrop of intensified great power rivalry. China is closely monitoring where the countries in Southeast Asia stand with regard to this competition and is actively cajoling them not to side with the US. Beijing is expected to do more on this front as Washington is stepping up efforts to rally more Asian allies and partners over to its side.³⁴

However, Beijing's efforts to condition Southeast Asian countries or ASEAN into a certain type of behaviour that it finds acceptable is easier said than done. This is because China's actions in areas of direct concern to Southeast Asia undermine what it seeks to achieve. Foremost among them is Beijing's aggressive moves in the South China Sea such as its resort to lasers,³⁵ water cannons³⁶ and dangerous manoeuvres to prevent the Philippines from resupplying its personnel on the *Sierra Madre* on Second Thomas Shoal. These actions have emboldened the Philippines to strengthen its military and defence ties with the US, an outcome Beijing is strongly opposed to. China's recent unveiling of a new 10-dash line map has further raised concerns in Southeast Asia and beyond. Taken together, these actions further weaken China's call on relevant countries to resolve matters bilaterally and to expedite discussions on the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea.

China's actions in other areas have also added to these countries' wariness of Beijing. While China has accused the US of long-arm jurisdiction,³⁷ it is not entirely blame-free on this front either as it has reportedly established over 100 quasi-official overseas police stations including in Cambodia and Brunei, which undermines the sovereignty of the host countries.³⁸ In addition, recent examples of Beijing's use of economic coercion against countries like South Korea, Australia and Lithuania serve as timely reminders that the Southeast Asian countries of the Philippines and Singapore too were victims of such coercive tactics in the past.³⁹

Southeast Asian countries will need to be adept at navigating the increasingly complex US-China relationship. As these countries act on their respective national interests, their foreign policy decisions could at times appear to be aligned or non-aligned with either power, depending on the issue. China and the US therefore should regard Southeast Asia and the countries in the region on their merits and not merely through the lens of great power competition. Instead of the refrain that China and Southeast Asia have the “capability and wisdom” to address their own problems, a better starting point for Beijing would be to appreciate that Southeast Asian countries have the “capability and wisdom” to do what is right for their own interests and for regional peace and stability. This includes their strategic choice to be friends with not only China but other key partners like the US, Australia, the EU, India, Japan and South Korea.

ENDNOTES

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⁴ “Qin Gang Meets with ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn”, China’s foreign ministry, 22 February 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202303/t20230313_11039784.html.

⁵ “FM Qin stresses Europe’s strategic autonomy when visiting France”, *Global Times*, 11 May 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202305/1290589.shtml>.

⁶ In previous years, Xi’s first foreign trips were to Moscow, Russia (2013); Sochi, Russia (2014); Pakistan (2015); Saudi Arabia (2016); Switzerland (2017); United Arab Emirates (2018); and Italy (2019).

⁷ Apart from Southeast Asia, the other two trips were to Central Asia and the Middle East. In September 2022, Xi Jinping embarked on state visits to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and attended the 22nd meeting of the Council of the Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. In December 2022, Xi Jinping travelled to Saudi Arabia for a state visit and attended the 1st China-Arab States Summit and the China-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit. See Xi Jinping’s foreign travels in 2022, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/2022/.

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- ¹⁵ “Wenlubu gongbu di san pi huifu chujing tuandui you youguan guojia he diqu mingdan” (The Ministry of Culture and Tourism announces the list of the third batch of countries and regions for resumption of outbound group tours), *China News*, 10 August 2023, <http://m.chinanews.com/wap/detail/zw/cul/2023/08-10/10058852.shtml>. Myanmar, the last ASEAN member state, was only added to the list in August 2023. This was most likely due to the unstable situation in the country.
- ¹⁶ Jianpuzhai houren shouxiang Hong Manai huijian Wangyi (Cambodian Prime Minister-designate Hun Manet Meets with Wang Yi), China’s foreign ministry, 13 August 2023. On 7 August 2023, Cambodian King Norodom Sihamoni issued a royal decree appointing Hun Manet as the prime minister of Cambodia. Hun Manet was officially sworn in as prime minister on 22 August 2023.
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