

# Promoting Regional Peace and Building a Safe Homeland Together: China-ASEAN Maritime Security Cooperation

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## Abstract

This study examines China-ASEAN maritime security cooperation through the dual framework of achieving peace through out prosperity and security. Drawing from naval defense management expertise and Indonesia's strategic maritime perspective, this research analyzes how economic interdependence and security cooperation can simultaneously build regional stability. The analysis incorporates recent developments, including ACFTA 3.0 negotiations, Code of Conduct progress, and emerging multilateral frameworks, while addressing both traditional territorial disputes and non-traditional maritime threats. The study argues that sustainable cooperation requires balancing economic integration with strategic autonomy through strengthened institutional mechanisms that preserve ASEAN centrality.

**Keywords:** Maritime Security, China-ASEAN Cooperation, Regional Peace, ASEAN Centrality, Indo-Pacific

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary maritime security landscape in the Indo-Pacific represents a complex intersection of economic interdependence and strategic competition that fundamentally shapes regional stability (Till, 2018; Damayanti, 2019). The China-ASEAN maritime cooperation has evolved from traditional diplomatic engagement into a multidimensional partnership encompassing economic integration, security coordination, and institutional development across contested waters (Gerstl, 2022; Yang & Li, 2022). This transformation occurs within what Salim (2025) conceptualizes as dual pathways toward regional peace: achieving stability through economic prosperity and security cooperation.

Establishing Indonesia's Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue (CSD) with China in April 2025 exemplifies this evolution, expanding bilateral cooperation across five pillars, including maritime, economic, security, political, and people-to-people exchanges (Salim, 2025). This institutional development reflects broader trends in China-ASEAN relations, where bilateral trade reached \$982.34 billion in 2024 while territorial disputes in the South China Sea continue challenging regional stability (China Report ASEAN, 2025; Buszynski & Do, 2020).

From the perspective of naval defense management and maritime security operations, this study examines how economic prosperity and security approaches can be integrated to build sustainable cooperation frameworks. The analysis draws from operational experience in maritime law enforcement and naval operations to assess practical implementation challenges while evaluating the effectiveness of existing diplomatic mechanisms, including the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and ongoing Code of Conduct (CoC) negotiations.

The research addresses three critical questions: How can economic interdependence contribute to maritime security without compromising strategic autonomy? What institutional mechanisms best support dual-track cooperation approaches? How can ASEAN centrality be preserved while accommodating great power competition in maritime domains? These

questions are particularly relevant given recent developments including the ASEAN-GCC Plus China Summit and accelerated efforts toward a legally binding Code of Conduct by 2026.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Prosperity and Security Pathways**

The conceptual distinction between prosperity-based and security-based approaches to peace-building provides a framework for understanding China-ASEAN maritime cooperation dynamics (Salim, 2025). Prosperity-focused strategies emphasize economic development, trade facilitation, and shared resource management as foundations for regional stability, while security-oriented approaches prioritize law enforcement, conflict prevention, and defense cooperation (Baviera, 2016; Lai, 2017).

These approaches are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary dimensions of comprehensive maritime security. Economic interdependence creates incentives for peaceful dispute resolution while providing resources for cooperative initiatives (Wester, 2023; Yang et al., 2022). Simultaneously, security cooperation builds trust and confidence necessary for sustaining economic partnerships amid territorial disputes and strategic competition (Lee & Chan, 2021; Hu, 2023).

The integration of prosperity and security pathways requires institutional mechanisms that can manage both cooperative and competitive dynamics. ASEAN's role as a central coordinating body becomes crucial in this context, as it provides frameworks for multilateral engagement while preserving member state autonomy (ASEAN, 2019; Simões, 2022). The success of this integration depends on the ability to compartmentalize specific disputes while expanding functional cooperation in areas of shared interest.

## **3. Economic Foundations of Maritime Cooperation**

### **3.1 Trade Integration and Investment Dynamics**

China-ASEAN economic integration has reached unprecedented levels, with ASEAN serving as China's largest trading partner for five consecutive years while China maintains its position as ASEAN's largest trading partner for sixteen years (China Report ASEAN, 2025; Xinhua, 2025). The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has structurally deepened this relationship, with intermediate goods trade rising to 67% of the total volume since implementation, indicating the formation of resilient production networks (Xinhua, 2025; ASEAN & China, 2023).

However, this economic interdependence creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities for maritime security cooperation. While trade integration provides incentives for peaceful dispute resolution, it also enables economic coercion and dependency relationships that can undermine strategic autonomy (Wester, 2023; Putra et al., 2019). The experience of countries like Cambodia and Laos, where extensive Chinese economic assistance influences foreign policy positions, demonstrates how prosperity pathways can affect security calculations (Simões, 2022; Baviera, 2016).

Indonesia's bilateral relationship illustrates balanced integration approaches, with total trade reaching \$135.17 billion in 2024 while maintaining diverse economic partnerships (Salim, 2025). Chinese investment totaling \$36.4 billion since 2019 supports infrastructure development without creating excessive dependency, demonstrating how prosperity-focused cooperation can enhance rather than undermine security autonomy.

### **3.2 ACFTA 3.0 and Institutional Innovation**

The substantial conclusion of ACFTA 3.0 negotiations represents institutional innovation in trade integration, emphasizing business-friendly, future-oriented, and inclusive approaches (China Report ASEAN, 2025; ASEAN & China, 2023). This agreement extends

beyond traditional trade liberalization to encompass digital economy cooperation, green development initiatives, and enhanced connectivity projects that directly impact maritime security environments.

Yang and Li (2022) demonstrate how the Belt and Road Initiative's Maritime Silk Road component creates both opportunities and challenges for the ASEAN states. While infrastructure investments enhance connectivity and economic development, concerns about debt sustainability, strategic control of critical infrastructure, and sovereignty implications require careful management through multilateral frameworks (Gerstl, 2022; Baviera, 2016).

The integration of blue economy initiatives within ACFTA 3.0 frameworks provides mechanisms for addressing maritime resource management challenges while building economic cooperation (ASEAN, 2023). These initiatives encompass sustainable fisheries management, marine environmental protection, and offshore renewable energy development that require coordinated approaches transcending territorial disputes.

## **4. Security Challenges and Cooperative Responses**

### **4.1 Traditional Security Dynamics**

The South China Sea territorial disputes remain the primary challenge to China-ASEAN maritime security cooperation, with ongoing incidents demonstrating escalatory potential despite diplomatic efforts (Buszynski & Do, 2020; Salleh et al., 2021). The Sandy Cay Reef incident referenced by Salim (2025) exemplifies how competing sovereignty claims generate conflicting narratives and operational tensions that complicate broader cooperation initiatives.

China's military infrastructure development on artificial islands, including airstrips, radar installations, and missile systems, has fundamentally altered regional military balances while complicating traditional deterrence calculations (Buszynski & Do, 2020; Heydarian & Crispin, 2024). The implementation of the China's Coast Guard Law, authorizing force against vessels deemed illegally present in Chinese jurisdictional waters, creates additional legal and operational uncertainties for maritime law enforcement cooperation (Salleh et al., 2021; Nong, 2025).

These traditional security challenges require management through confidence-building measures, incident prevention protocols, and dispute resolution mechanisms that can operate independently of ultimate sovereignty determinations (ASEAN, 2023; Hu, 2023). The development of such mechanisms represents a practical application of security-focused approaches to peace-building that complement economic cooperation efforts.

### **4.2 Non-Traditional Maritime Threats**

Non-traditional maritime security challenges provide opportunities for functional cooperation that can build trust while addressing shared concerns (Yang et al., 2022; Lee & Chan, 2021). Piracy and armed robbery incidents, with Southeast Asia accounting for 56% of global incidents in 2023, require coordinated responses that transcend territorial disputes (ICC IMB, 2024). The successful cooperation models, including the Malacca Straits Patrol and trilateral maritime patrols in the Sulu Sea, demonstrate effective approaches to shared security challenges (ASEAN, 2023; Llewelyn, 2017).

Environmental threats including marine pollution, plastic debris, and coral reef degradation necessitate collaborative responses that align with both prosperity and security objectives (ASEAN, 2023; Yang et al., 2022). The ASEAN Regional Action Plan on Combating Marine Debris exemplifies trilateral cooperation involving member states, external partners, and international organizations that could serve as templates for broader China-ASEAN environmental cooperation.

The illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing represents a particularly complex challenge intersection of traditional and non-traditional security concerns. Yang et al. (2022) document that South China Sea fishery resources have declined by 70-95% since the 1950s, creating competition pressures that exacerbate territorial tensions while requiring collaborative management approaches.

#### **4.3 Emerging Technology and Cyber Challenges**

Technological developments in autonomous maritime systems, artificial intelligence, and cyber capabilities create both opportunities and risks for maritime security cooperation (Till, 2018; Salleh et al., 2021). Sophisticated cyber campaigns targeting government agencies and maritime infrastructure demonstrate the need for enhanced cooperation in cybersecurity, information sharing, and incident response (Salleh et al., 2021; Harususilo, 2024).

The development of joint technology standards, information-sharing protocols, and capacity-building programs can enhance maritime domain awareness while building trust between security agencies (ASEAN, 2023; Llewelyn, 2017). These technological cooperation initiatives align with prosperity-focused approaches while addressing security vulnerabilities that affect all regional actors.

### **5. Institutional Mechanisms and ASEAN Centrality**

#### **5.1 Diplomatic Frameworks and Norm Development**

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, established in 1976, provides the foundational normative framework for China-ASEAN maritime cooperation through principles of mutual respect, non-interference, and peaceful dispute settlement (Salim, 2025; ASEAN, 2009). China's accession to the TAC in 2003 demonstrated acceptance of ASEAN-led diplomatic processes while establishing precedents for major power engagement within regional institutional frameworks (Baviera, 2016; Damayanti, 2019).

ASEAN centrality faces significant challenges in managing great power competition while maintaining institutional relevance and member-state unity (Putra et al., 2019; Simões, 2022). The consensus-based decision-making process that enables internal cohesion creates vulnerabilities when addressing external pressures, particularly when member states have divergent interests regarding relationships with major powers (Hu, 2023; Sanjaya, 2024).

Recent developments including the completion of the second reading of the Single Draft CoC Negotiating Text and the establishment of guidelines for accelerated conclusion demonstrate renewed momentum in multilateral diplomatic processes (ASEAN, 2023; Salim, 2025). Philippine Foreign Minister Enrique Manalo's statement regarding political commitment to complete a legally binding CoC by 2026 indicates a potential breakthrough in long-stalled negotiations.

#### **5.2 Confidence-Building and Conflict Prevention**

Practical confidence-building measures provide mechanisms for managing tensions while broader political issues remain unresolved (ASEAN, 2023; Llewelyn, 2017). The Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), endorsed by ASEAN and China in 2016, establishes protocols for naval interactions designed to reduce misunderstandings and prevent escalation (ASEAN, 2023; Buszynski & Do, 2020).

Additional mechanisms including hotline communications for maritime emergencies, operationalized between ASEAN member states and China in 2017, provide direct channels for crisis communication and coordination (ASEAN, 2023; Yang et al., 2022). The ADMM Guidelines for Maritime Interaction, adopted in 2019, establish comprehensive frameworks for

maritime conflict management based on confidence-building and preventive diplomacy principles.

Llewelyn (2017) advocates for enhanced civil maritime security cooperation through Coast Guard agencies, arguing that "white hull diplomacy" offers more politically sustainable approaches than military-to-military engagement. The civilian nature of Coast Guard operations can circumvent sovereignty sensitivities while building practical cooperation on shared challenges including search and rescue, environmental protection, and law enforcement.

### **5.3 Multilateral Summit Mechanisms**

The ASEAN-GCC Plus China Summit, hosted by Malaysia in May 2025, represents innovative approaches to trilateral cooperation involving regional organizations with complementary interests in maritime connectivity and energy security (Salim, 2025). This inaugural summit addressed South China Sea territorial claims, trade issues, and economic cooperation amid global trade tensions, demonstrating the integration of economic and security considerations in contemporary multilateral diplomacy.

Regional cooperation models including the Indian Ocean Rim Association's convergence with ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook provide frameworks for coordinated approaches to shared maritime challenges (IORA, 2022; ASEAN, 2019). The September 2023 Memorandum of Understanding between IORA and ASEAN aims to enhance cooperation in the blue economy, digital technology, and environmental initiatives that support both prosperity and security objectives.

### **5.4 Existing Cooperation Frameworks**

**China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund:** Established in 2011, this fund supports marine scientific research, environmental protection, and other maritime cooperation initiatives. Chinese leaders repeatedly proposed making 2015 the year of ASEAN-China maritime cooperation. This is not entirely new – ASEAN and China have been talking about how to foster maritime cooperation for a while now, with Beijing unveiling a China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund in 2011. But 2015 was supposed to mark a landmark year that would highlight ASEAN-China cooperation in this area and tie it in with the development of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

**ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership:** This partnership encompasses a wide range of security cooperation issues, including maritime security, counter-terrorism, and transnational crime. China has made a comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP) with ASEAN that would open up more opportunities for the two parties. However, some view it as another success on China's part as it now has gained influence over ASEAN. However, such a view that downplays ASEAN as a mere instrument for China's plan in the region would not provide a proper view.

**Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF):** A platform for dialogue and cooperation on maritime issues, promoting regional maritime security and safety. The AMF was established in 2010 as one of ASEAN's mechanisms in addressing regional maritime issues in a holistic and integrated approach. The AMF is held annually, or at any intervals as agreed by ASEAN Member States, and its Chairmanship is decided on a voluntary basis. The recommendation of the AMF is submitted to the ASEAN SOM for consideration. The AMF aims to serve as a value-added forum for dialogue and coordination among concerned agencies on maritime-related issues within the ASEAN framework. The AMF is not designed nor oriented to become security-centric. It is designed as an acknowledgment of the multi-dimensional nature of

maritime issues and the necessity to develop a regional comprehensive approach to maritime cooperation.

## **6. Future Prospects and Institutional Recommendations**

### **6.1 Integrated Cooperation Mechanisms**

Future China-ASEAN maritime security cooperation requires institutional mechanisms that effectively integrate prosperity and security approaches while maintaining ASEAN centrality in regional architecture. Salim (2025) proposes four priority areas: Code of Conduct finalization, collision prevention mechanisms, the establishment of a China-ASEAN Maritime Law Enforcement Agency Training Centre (CAMLEATC), and the creation of a China-ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Training Center (CAHADR-TC). In the Era of digitalization and big data, Maritime Security Cooperation Dynamic Control Systems (MSCDCS) also need to be established to see the size of cooperation from an academic perspective.

These proposals reflect practical needs identified through naval operational experience while aligning with broader trends toward functional cooperation in maritime security domains (Yang et al., 2022; Lee & Chan, 2021). Successful implementation requires sustained political commitment, adequate resource allocation, and clear operational mandates that enable effective coordination between participating agencies.

The involvement of non-state actors, including academic institutions, civil society organizations, and private sector entities, can enhance implementation capacity while building public support for cooperative initiatives (Damayanti, 2019; ASEAN, 2023). Technology transfer, joint research programs, and capacity-building initiatives provide mechanisms for building trust while addressing shared capabilities gaps.

### **6.2 Balancing Economic Integration and Strategic Autonomy**

Sustainable maritime security cooperation requires careful balancing of economic integration with strategic autonomy preservation (Wester, 2023; Gerstl, 2022). ASEAN member states must maintain diversified economic relationships while deepening beneficial cooperation with China through mechanisms that prevent excessive dependency and preserve policy autonomy (Simões, 2022; Baviera, 2016).

Regional economic integration through RCEP and ACFTA 3.0 should be complemented by intra-ASEAN cooperation initiatives and partnerships with other major economies to maintain strategic balance (ASEAN & China, 2023; China Report ASEAN, 2025). The development of alternative supply chains, investment sources, and technology partnerships can reduce vulnerabilities while maintaining beneficial economic ties.

Security cooperation should focus on shared challenges that do not directly implicate territorial sovereignty, including counter-piracy operations, search and rescue coordination, environmental protection, and disaster response (ASEAN, 2023; Llewelyn, 2017). These functional cooperation areas can create positive spillover effects that gradually expand trust and cooperation into more sensitive security domains.

## **7. Conclusion**

The China-ASEAN maritime security cooperation represents a critical test case for managing great power competition while building regional stability through integrated prosperity and security approaches. The analysis demonstrates that while significant challenges persist, particularly regarding South China Sea territorial disputes, substantial opportunities exist for enhanced cooperation in addressing shared maritime threats and building institutional mechanisms that support long-term stability.

The institutional foundations, including the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties, and ongoing Code of Conduct negotiations, provide frameworks for managing tensions while building confidence through practical cooperation initiatives. Recent developments including ACFTA 3.0 conclusion, the ASEAN-GCC Plus China Summit, and enhanced coordination with organizations like IORA demonstrate evolution toward a more comprehensive and inclusive regional architecture.

From a naval operational perspective, emphasis must focus on practical cooperation that delivers tangible benefits while building the trust necessary for addressing complex political challenges. **The proposed institutional mechanisms, including maritime law enforcement training centers, humanitarian assistance training centers and a maritime security cooperation dynamic control system, represent achievable objectives that can demonstrate multilateral cooperation value while preserving ASEAN centrality in regional governance.**

Success ultimately depends on the political will to prioritize regional stability and prosperity over narrow competitive interests. As maritime domains continue growing in strategic importance, the China-ASEAN partnership has the potential to serve as a model for peaceful cooperation in contested global commons. The challenge for policymakers and security practitioners involves seizing these opportunities while carefully managing risks inherent in great power competition and territorial disputes through integrated approaches that balance economic prosperity with security cooperation requirements.

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