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# **ASEAN-China Relations Realities and Prospects**

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# **ASEAN-China Relations Realities and Prospects**

EDITED BY

**Saw Swee-Hock • Sheng Lijun • Chin Kin Wah**



Institute of Southeast Asian Studies  
Singapore

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Pasir Panjang  
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*E-mail:* [publish@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:publish@iseas.edu.sg)

*Website:* <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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# The Contributors

**BAVIERA, Aileen S.P.** is an associate professor and dean of the Asian Center, University of the Philippines. Her research covers Asia Pacific regional security, China-Southeast Asian relations, Asian regionalism and community building, and maritime security. She has been a member of the East Asia Vision Group, headed the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies of the Philippine Foreign Service Institute, and served as Executive Director of the Philippine-China Development Resource Center. Her recent books include *China's Relations with Southeast Asia: Political, Security and Economic Interests* (1999); *Comprehensive Engagement: Strategic Issues in Philippines-China Relations* (2000); *Bilateral Confidence Building with China in Relation to the South China Sea Disputes: A Philippine Perspective* (2000). She has also co-edited several books and published articles in *Asian Studies* (2000) and the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (July 2003).

**CAI Bingkui** is a major general (Rtd.) of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in China and vice-chairman of the China Institute for International Strategic Studies. He was defence attaché to Thailand and Pakistan.

**CAO Yunhua** is a professor and the chair at Department of International Relations, and director of the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China. He is also vice president of the Chinese Association for Southeast Asia Studies. His research focuses on economics and politics in Southeast Asia, regional international relations and ethnic Chinese studies. He has authored six books and edited two, both in Chinese, and published more than one hundred academic papers in China and other countries.

**CHIN Kin Wah** is deputy director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore. He was formerly associate professor in the Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore. He is a specialist on regional affairs. His recent publications include *Southeast Asian Affairs 2005* (co-editor) and *Michael Leifer: Selected Works on Southeast Asia* (co-editor/co-compiler 2005).

**CHINWANNO, Chulacheeb** is an associate professor and head of the International Relations Department of the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand. He was former director of the Institute of East Asian Studies, and also the Human Resource Institute at Thammasat University. He is the senior expert of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Thailand. His research focuses on Asia-Pacific security and China and other major powers in Southeast Asia.

**CHIRATHIVAT, Suthiphand** is an associate professor of economics and former dean of the Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University. He has previously served as assistant to the dean of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at Kasetsart University as well as director of the Center for International Economics and the Center for European Studies at Chulalongkorn University. He is advisor to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Member of Thailand's Committee on International Economic Policy, and Corresponding Editor of *Journal of Asian Economics*. His recent publications include *Asia-Europe on the Eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (co-editor, 2001), *ASEAN-EU Economic Relations: The Long-term Potential beyond the Recent Turmoil* (co-editor, 1999).

**GAO Zhiguo** is executive director of the China Institute for Maritime Affairs and adjunct professor at the China University of Oceanography, and Research Centre for Eco-environmental Science, Chinese Academy of Sciences. He is also deputy to the National People's Congress (MP) and member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Congress. He was the principal drafter of China's major marine and maritime laws, including the law of the territorial sea and contiguous zones, and the law of exclusive economic zones and continental shelf. His research focuses on international law, law of the sea and natural and environmental law and maritime cooperation and security.

**HAN Feng** is a professor and deputy director of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing. His research covers

contemporary international relations in the Asia-Pacific region including ASEAN.

**HE Shengda** is a professor and vice president of the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, Kunming, China. He is also the vice president of the Chinese Association for Southeast Asian Studies. His research focuses on relations between China and Southeast Asia, especially Yunnan and mainland Southeast Asia. His publications include *Southeast Asia Toward the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and its Relations with China* (co-author, 1997); *ASEAN and China at Turn of the Centuries* (co-author, 2001); *Construction of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area and Yunnan's Opening to Southeast Asia* (co-author, 2003).

**HEDRICK-WONG, Yuwa** is MasterCard International's economic advisor for Asia/Pacific, monitoring and forecasting economic growth and emerging business development trends in the region. He also conducts research on the dynamics of the growth of the payments industry in all key markets in the region.

**HU Shisheng** is an associate professor and director of the Institute of South & Southeast Asia Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations. His research focuses on South Asia politics, India's foreign relations, including its relations with China and ASEAN. He has published extensively with many book chapters, among which are "Perspectives on the Ethnic & Religious Issues of China's Surrounding Regions" in the book *The Ethnic and Religious Situation of Nepal and Sri Lanka* (2002) and "Focus on the Global Religious Problems" in the book *The Role of Tibetan Buddhism in the Internationalization Process of the Tibetan Issue* (2002).

**KAO Kim Hourn** is Secretary of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation, Royal Government of Cambodia and president of the University of Cambodia. He was formerly executive director of the Cambodian Institute of Cooperation and Peace.

**KRAFT, Herman Joseph S.** is a research fellow at the Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, Manila, specializing in Philippine security issues, particularly its relations with the United States, and regional security in Southeast Asia. He is also a faculty member at the Department of Political Science at the University of the Philippines.

**LI Yaqiang** is naval captain of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in China.

**LIU Xuecheng** is a senior fellow and director of American Studies, China Institute of International Studies. He is also director of the Beijing Center for American Studies, director of the Asia Program, China Reform Forum, member of the CSCAP-China National Committee, and an ARF Expert/Eminent Person. His research focuses on China-US relations and Asia-Pacific political and security issues. He has written over 100 academic articles and research papers in leading Chinese journals or at international conferences and authored two books: *Sino-Indian Border Dispute and Sino-Indian Relations* (1994) and *China and U.S.: Rivals or Partners* (2001).

**MOHAMED JAWHAR HASSAN** is director-general of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), Malaysia. His research focuses on international relations, security and nation-building. In July 2002 he was nominated as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Expert and Eminent Person. He is also co-chair of the CSCAP Working Group on Cooperative Security and Comprehensive Security.

**ONG Keng Yong** is Secretary-General of ASEAN. He joined the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1979 and held senior positions including the director in charge of American and European affairs, Singapore's High Commissioner to India and ambassador to Nepal. He was seconded to Singapore Prime Minister's Office as the press secretary to the Prime Minister and concurrently to the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts as deputy secretary.

**RICHARDSON, Michael** is a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. He was Asia Editor of the International Herald Tribune. He has a longstanding interest in relations between Southeast Asia and Australasia. His recent research for ISEAS has focused on maritime security and his book is, *A Time Bomb for Global Trade: Maritime-related Terrorism in an Age of Weapons of Mass Destruction* (2004).

**SAW Swee-Hock** is Professorial Fellow and Adviser of the ASEAN-China Study Programme at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. He was formerly Professor of Statistics at the University of Singapore and the University of Hong Kong. He is a Council Member of the National University of Singapore, and a recipient of its Distinguished Alumni Service Award. Among his major publications are *Economic Problems and Prospects in ASEAN Countries* (co-editor), *ASEAN Economies in Transition* (editor), *Growth and Direction of*

*ASEAN Trade (co-editor), Malaysia: Recent Trends and Challenges (co-editor), Population Policies and Programmes in Singapore, Investment Management, and A Guide to Conducting Surveys.*

**SHEN Danyang** is a senior economist and vice president of the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, Ministry of Commerce. He is also secretary-general of the China Foreign Trade Award Inspection Committee and a council member of the China International Trade Society. He is editor-in-chief of *Foreign Trade Review* (Beijing).

**SHENG Lijun** is a senior fellow and coordinator of the ASEAN-China Study Programme at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. His research focuses on China's foreign relations in East Asia. He has written extensively, with articles published in numerous journals including the *Washington Quarterly*, the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *Security Dialogue*, *Asian Perspective*, *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, and *Pacific Focus*. He is the author of *China's Dilemma: The Taiwan Issue* (2001), and *Cross-Strait Relations under Chen Shui-bian* (2002).

**SISOWATH, Doung Chanto** is assistant dean and lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences & International Relations, Pannasastra University of Cambodia. He was formerly deputy executive director and a senior research fellow for the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace. He previously served in the Council of Ministers' Legal Coordinating Unit of the Royal Government of Cambodia.

**SURYADINATA, Leo** is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. He was formerly professor of political science at the National University of Singapore. He has published extensively on ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia as well as China-ASEAN relations. His books include: *China and the ASEAN States: Ethnic Chinese Dimension* (1985), *Pribumi Indonesian, the Chinese Minority and China* (1993) and *Ethnic Relations and Nation-Building in Southeast Asia: The Case of the Ethnic Chinese* (editor 2004).

**TEO, Eric Chu Cheow** is council secretary of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs and managing director of Savoir Faire Corporate Consultants, Singapore. He specializes in political and economic risk analysis and the political economy of East Asian countries and has written extensively for numerous local and international academic publications. He has also undertaken consultancy projects for the World Bank. He was conferred the

title of *Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérit* by the President and Government of the Republic of France on 1 December 2003.

**WANANDI, Jusuf** is a senior analyst of Southeast Asian regionalism and the politics and foreign policies of Indonesia and the United States. He is a co-founder of Indonesia's Centre for Strategic and International Studies. He has co-authored or co-edited more than a dozen books, including *Europe and the Asia Pacific* (1998), *Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region* (1993), and *Asia and the Major Powers* (1988)

**WANG Gungwu** is director, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.; professor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore; and emeritus professor of the Australian National University. He was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong in 1986–95.

**WANG Zhongchun**, is a senior colonel of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), professor and deputy director of the Training and Research Division for Foreign Officer Students, PLA National Defense University (NDU). He was a senior fellow in the Institute for Strategic Studies of NDU for more than 10 years. His research focuses on China-U.S. relations, particularly in the field of security. He has authored several books, including *The Pentagon's Secret Plan for the Use of Nuclear Weapons; On Modern U.S. Army; The U.S. Nuclear Armament and Nuclear Strategy; International Disarmament and Arms Control; and The Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear Powers, and Their Nuclear Strategies.*

**ZHANG Xiaoji** is a senior research fellow and director-general of the Research Department of Foreign Economic Relations, Development Research Centre of the State Council of the PRC. He is also standing member of the China Association of International Trade, China Association of International Economic Cooperation and professor of Beijing Normal University. His research focuses on China's macroeconomic management, foreign economic policy and regional economic integration.

**ZHANG Youwen** is professor and director at the Institute of World Economy, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. He is also a member of the expert team for Financial and Economic Committee of the Standing Committee of Shanghai People's Congress, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of World Economic Studies*, a council member of the China Association of World Economy and vice chairman of the Shanghai Association of World Economy.

# Foreword

The rise of China is one of the most critical developments in the world today. Some are reflective on its meaning and implications. Others ponder over the long-term impact on the region's security landscape while exploring security cooperation with this major power. The regional business community seeks to adjust to this change, wondering how to ride the tide of benefits that can come with the creation of an ASEAN-China Free Trade Area. There will be the downside but, for the present, the focus is on the immense opportunities that will come with the rise of China. Both ASEAN and China are hoping for a win-win outcome. For better or worse, the rise of China is a development we can ill afford to ignore.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of China's rapid rise and explore the impact and implications for ASEAN, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) organized the first ASEAN-China Forum from 23 to 24 June 2004 in Singapore. The forum brought together more than thirty reputable experts and scholars from China and ASEAN countries. They included strategic thinkers, senior economists and policy advisers from leading research institutions and think-tanks. Among the Chinese participants were representatives from the State Council, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

HE Ong Keng Yong, ASEAN Secretary General, delivered the keynote address on how to develop ASEAN-China relations, while Professor Cai Bingkui, PLA Major General and Vice Chairman of China Institute for International Strategic Studies, delivered the luncheon speech on "China's Peaceful Development and Relations with Its East Asian Neighbours".

Issues discussed at the forum included ASEAN and China assessments of the evolving security environment in Southeast Asia; the role of other major powers; the prospects for ASEAN-China maritime security cooperation;

strengthening cooperation in the ARF; the proposed ASEAN-China FTA; cooperation in human resources development; cooperation for Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS) development; moving beyond confidence-building in the South China Sea; the ethnic Chinese factor in ASEAN-China relations; and strengthening East Asian cooperation through the ASEAN+3 process.

ISEAS hopes that this publication, which contains the essence of the discussions at the two-day forum, will contribute towards a greater understanding of ASEAN-China relations.

I would like to acknowledge, with thanks, Professor Saw Swee-Hock's sponsorship of the ASEAN-China Study Programme which funded the holding of the forum and the publication of this book.

*K. Kesavapany*  
*Director*  
*ISEAS*



# Opening Remarks

On behalf of ISEAS, let me welcome all of you to ASEAN-China Forum 2004. ISEAS is only slightly younger than the original ASEAN first established in 1967, but ISEAS has, of course, not grown together with ASEAN in every respect. For one thing, ISEAS did not admit five new partners. For another, I am delighted to add ISEAS did not experience the financial crisis that almost paralysed some of the members of ASEAN. I say this only in jest in order to emphasize how presumptuous it is for me to mention ISEAS and ASEAN in the same breath. But, seriously, there is one link between the two that I am not afraid to point to. The founders of ASEAN, like those of our institute, would not have expected ASEAN to grow as quickly and as dramatically as it did during this past decade. The fact is that, despite the crises for some members and for the region as a whole, ASEAN proved to be more than viable under great stress and the Secretary General's office in Jakarta is now busier than ever before.

Among ASEAN's many changes, there were a few that were exceptional. One of them was something that the founders of our institute would hardly have dared to dream of. I refer to the fact that ASEAN, the organization that the ISEAS as a research centre began to study almost from day one of its foundation, would one day have the People's Republic of China as one of its warmest supporters. I think it would have been inconceivable for any of our founders that we can now expect concrete plans to be drawn up for ASEAN and China to develop a Free Trade Area.

It is humbling to think how far ASEAN has come. You can thus imagine how proud our institute is to hold this forum today on "Developing ASEAN-China Relations". We are indeed grateful that the Secretary General Mr Ong Keng Yong has found it possible to come and support our efforts and give us this keynote address.

I also want to thank the large number of paper writers and discussants who have agreed to help us explore the many realities that this relationship will have to face. We have many expert essays here on how ASEAN-China relations might be developed in the coming years and there are even more ideas there about the prospects for the relationship to progress smoothly. Needless to say, we look forward to the discussions that these papers will stimulate.

However, there is one set of realities that we should not forget. ASEAN began under conditions of insecurity and threat but sought to focus initially on the possibilities of economic cooperation. The leaders of the five original members and their officials spent a lot of time tracing the ways and means for such cooperation to take effect. But, until the late 1980s, progress in intra-regional economic relations was exceedingly slow with each member depending mainly on extra-regional trading relations for their development. In contrast, economic growth *within* each country into the first half of the 1990s was more dramatic. It has been explained that this had to do directly with the fact that the U.S. economy was doing so well during that period. Perhaps the sharp entrepreneurship of many of the region's businessmen has something to do with it, too. We may even have to thank the cultural values that we have been so fortunate to have inherited.

But the explanations that take us back to some major political decisions are those that attract me most of all. I do feel that they really made the difference between sluggish and cheeseparing talk and the readiness to take decisive steps forward. Let me mention a few obvious examples. In 1978, Chinese leaders turned away from an ideology that made the country poorer and that changed the background for ASEAN's position. Another, ASEAN and its allies acted together to help rebuild the Cambodian nation and that was remarkable. Also, American political leaders pushed the Soviet Union to a state of collapse and ended the Cold War, indirectly giving ASEAN fresh fields to conquer. Yet another, ASEAN leaders decided to invite the remaining four Southeast Asian countries to join ASEAN; that was a decision not without pain but it was one that has led to other very promising possibilities.

None of these decisions is related to the feeble efforts before the 1990s among ASEAN members to cooperate economically. I cannot help but think that, where there is no political will, economic relations will always develop at the slowest allowable pace. ASEAN's recent relationship with China reminds us how true this observation can be. Out of the blue came a decision by China's leaders to seek a Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN as a whole. For boldness, the region has rarely seen anything like this since the organization was first mooted. Suddenly, a new configuration emerged. All kinds of gears

had to be changed in the ASEAN vehicle and also in some of our neighbours' machines. I therefore underline one of the realities for the conference to ponder on, the need for political will to be exercised by ASEAN leaders.

Such an emphasis, of course, suggests that the prospects of ASEAN-China relations developing smoothly, and according to the time hoped for, may also depend on bold political decisions in the future. We note that ASEAN has acted firmly several times before. This has been possible whenever ASEAN gave more weight to the organization as a whole and softened its insistence on each member's absolute sovereignty. Whenever the mantra of non-intervention in each other's affairs is silenced because of an urgent need that most members can see, ASEAN as an entity has taken a step forward. That is what I am inclined to see. Even if this observation is only partly true, I hope that past experiences will encourage ASEAN members to be bold from time to time.

Today, this forum is pursuing the consequences of China's first moves, the fact that China made the initial difference. But I see no reason to doubt that ASEAN too could do the same the next time round. It may be that, for the relationship to take the next great step forward, more will depend on ASEAN. I do not know if that will be so, but I do expect the sessions today and tomorrow to provide us with some evidence that ASEAN has reached the point when the organization will now do some of the leading. What I do know is that when the secretary general and his colleagues in Jakarta identify the way that ASEAN should next go, they would expect the leaders of ASEAN to have the will to move along with them.

*Wang Gungwu*  
*Chairman*  
*ISEAS*