

China's good terms and prosperity with ASEAN (Lu Jianren China Daily 2006-10-21)

The 15 years since dialogue was established between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have witnessed steadily improving relations between the two sides.

ASEAN, founded in 1967, includes Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Viet Nam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines and Brunei. Despite being close neighbours, China and ASEAN did not have official relations until 1991, due largely to the negative influence of the Cold War.

China and ASEAN's member countries are all developing nations, and therefore share many common interests. As the Cold War came to an end, the two sides put economic development and maintenance of regional stability on top of their agenda. In this scenario, the two sides had the intention for dialogue and co-operation.

Against this backdrop, Qian Qichen, then China's foreign minister, was invited to attend the Opening Ceremony of the 24th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Ministerial Meeting in July 1991, which signified that the curtain was being raised on China-ASEAN relations.

During the 1997 Asian financial crisis, China stood firm against devaluing the Chinese currency. At the same time, the Chinese Government tried its best to provide financial and monetary support to ASEAN's member countries. The latter, feeling keenly what an important part China could play in the region, emerged from the crisis with much greater trust and confidence in China.

Henceforth, ASEAN initiated the mechanisms of ASEAN 10 Plus Three, referring to the 10 ASEAN member countries on the one side and China, Japan and the Republic of Korea on the other - and later ASEAN 10 Plus One, meaning ASEAN and China. This introduced mechanisms for the leaders of the parties involved to meet on a regular basis.

In November 2002, the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Co-operation between China and ASEAN was signed, setting in motion a process towards the establishment of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area by 2010.

China joined the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in Southeast Asia in October 2003, signalling that the two sides enjoyed enhanced mutual political trust. The two sides also signed the China-ASEAN Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Bali, Indonesia in October 2003, making China ASEAN's first strategic partner.

Over the 15 years since China-ASEAN relations began, the two parties have managed to make impressive accomplishments in a number of fields.

Politically, to begin with, the two parties succeeded in bringing about a strategic partnership in just over a decade, laying down a solid foundation for the development of dialogues in the long term.

China initiated the policy of "being on good terms with neighbouring countries, having peaceful relations with them and helping make them prosperous." On the other hand, ASEAN began to regard China as playing a vitally important role in promoting peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

In the area of security, the two parties tried to settle disputes through diplomacy and negotiations. For instance, the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea was concluded in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The signing of a package of agreements, pacts and accords signalled the desire of both China and ASEAN to promote trust, confidence and co-operation.

In the field of economics, trade, investment and economic co-operation, China and ASEAN have made dramatic advances over the past 15 years, especially after 2003 when the process of bringing about the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area was launched. Now, China and ASEAN have each become the other's fourth-largest trade partner.

Co-operation in the financial sector is also being staged under the Chang Mai Initiative.

In addition, the two parties listed agriculture, information and telecommunications, human resources development, mutual investment and development of the Mekong River Basin as five priority areas for co-operation. Transport, energy, culture, tourism and public health were added to the list in 2005.

Both sides are also working together to promote the development and progress of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation and other inter-regional co-operative mechanisms. Within the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, China and ASEAN also coordinate their work.

The success of the China-ASEAN co-operation is explained by four factors.

First, the two sides treat one another on equal terms and show mutual respect. All countries, no matter how large or small, are on equal footing, should respect each other's chosen path of development and should refrain from interfering in each other's internal affairs.

Second, they seek common ground, shelving differences and trying to boost mutual trust. Dialogue and negotiations should be employed step-by-step once friction or disputes arise from bilateral relations, and both parties should take the limits of each other's endurance into consideration.

Third, bilateral relations should be based on mutual benefit and on making each side a winner. When co-operating in economic and other areas, both parties are supposed to take care of each other's needs, steering clear of unnecessary competition and bringing about a win-win situation. This enables both parties to enjoy the greatest possible benefits and fruits of co-operation.

Fourth, co-operative mechanisms should be introduced so that bilateral relations can move ahead smoothly and steadily. Mechanisms for dialogue have been put in place at various levels, as have those for government leaders to meet on a regular basis. This provides an institutional guarantee for co-operation.

Fifteen years of efforts by both parties have brought about a solid and comprehensive China-ASEAN relationship that benefits both. Viewed objectively, this is ASEAN's most substantial and most dynamic relationship with the outside world.

Given that the development goal of China-ASEAN co-operation in the next 10 or 15 years is largely identical to China's pursuit of a well-off society and ASEAN's target of Ten Nations, One Community, the interests of the two parties are orientated to much the same direction. This means that the China-ASEAN strategic partnership and co-operation have rosy prospects.