

**CHINA'S CHANGING APPROACHES
TO SOUTHEAST ASIA AND ASEAN**

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Executive Summary

1. Although a priority for China's neighbourhood diplomacy, Southeast Asia's precise place in China's list of priorities is still a topic of debate among Chinese policymakers. Notwithstanding, the region continues to occupy a pivotal place in Chinese strategy.
2. China has always declared its support for ASEAN centrality in East Asian cooperation as it appreciates ASEAN's unique role in the regional institutional structure and its assessment of strategic realities.
3. China supports ASEAN centrality in an evolving regional architecture, but not in specific areas involving vital Chinese interests such as the South China Sea.
4. Despite tensions in the South China Sea since 2009, China has sought to widen and deepen economic engagement with ASEAN. From the 2010 China-ASEAN free trade agreement to an upgrade of that agreement in 2015, and to the more recent Belt and Road Initiative, China is constantly expanding its economic influence in the region.
5. While there are important attitudinal shifts in Chinese views of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, the central pillar of Chinese policy at the political level – non-interference in Southeast Asian governments' treatment of their minority ethnic-Chinese citizens – remains unchanged.
6. Since 2009, China's regional strategy of comprehensive reassurance has gradually given way to a new strategy of conditional reassurance, combined with active coercion towards specific target states.
7. There is also a stronger military dimension in China's strategy. Its most spectacular expression is the massive land reclamation and island building efforts in the South China Sea.

8. A new strategy towards the South China Sea has also emerged, characterised by a combination of deterrence and reassurance for achieving territorial interests.
9. While China is still committed to the ASEAN-centred multilateral institutionalism in an evolving regional architecture, it hopes to gradually enrich this architecture with its own institutional initiatives.
10. Over the past two decades, China has made political trust and economic cooperation the two central pillars of its relationship with ASEAN. Now it is making efforts to build a third pillar of diplomacy: people-to-people contact in the social, cultural and educational fields.