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## **China and the BIMP-EAGA Cooperation: Progress and Challenges**

Muhammad Zulfikar **Rakhmat\***  
Busan University of Foreign Studies<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

As one of the ASEAN sub-regions, the BIMP-EAGA has developed as an area of cooperation among ASEAN's external partners. Among these partners is China, which has engaged with the subregion since the early days of the sub-region's inception. In fact, in 2009 China and the BIMP-EAGA agreed a Framework of Cooperation, making the former a "strategic development partner". The objective of this paper is to contribute to the existing studies on China's relations with the ASEAN sub-regions by examining the progress and obstacles of the cooperation between China and the BIMP-EAGA. The paper argues that while the BIMP-EAGA has become a multilateral avenue for China to engage with the ASEAN and the sub-regional countries, the cooperation has been limited and superficial. This is primarily due to three key factors, specifically China's preference to engage with the BIMP-EAGA member nations bilaterally, the existence of more mature cooperative frameworks that have facilitated China's relations with the four countries, besides the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea between China and the sub-regional members.

**Keywords:** *China, BIMP-EAGA, Cooperation, ASEAN*

## 1. Introduction

The Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) was introduced in 1994 to strengthen the cooperation between the four countries in addressing a lack of socio-economic development in their respective areas (Kumar, 2003: 48). The BIMP-EAGA is one of the ASEAN sub-regional cooperations which emerged in the late 1980s. Sub-regional cooperation has emerged as a new international cooperation scheme that aims to promote economic development and regional security (Parks et al., 2018). The first ASEAN sub-regional framework was the Indonesian-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMS-GT) in 1989, which was established in response to Singapore's proposal to create an economic hinterland by undertaking joint projects that leverage each country's strengths. However, the IMS-GT has not progressed well, principally as the equity of the trilateral cooperation has been questioned. Singapore, as the better-off country, is seen as taking advantage of regional cooperation (Chang, 2004: 4).

In 1992, the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) was also established in response to the ASEAN Integration Initiative (IAI), to address the development gap between the developed and the underdeveloped member countries. Although the sub-region has several achievements, China's dominance as one of the members of the initiative has also been questioned (Summers, 2008). One year later, the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), was inaugurated and subsequently followed by the BIMP-EAGA in 1994. The latter is a sub-region concentrating on the maritime ASEAN members which aim to promote the development of the underdeveloped peripheral areas. To date, despite some failures in attaining substantial sub-regional development cooperation, it has achieved a number of successes in pursuing its objectives (Dent and Richter, 2011: 29). Despite the fact that the BIMP-EAGA once experienced a slowing down, notably after the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis, its activities became apparent in the early 2000s (Furuoka, 2007: 27-28). In 2003, it established an intergovernmental coordinating body and the Facilitation Centre (Dent and Richter, 2011: 29). In the same year, the first BIMP-EAGA Leaders' Summit was held on the margins of an ASEAN summit

(Elisabeth, 2008: 191). Over the years, the BIMP-EAGA has developed through the guidance of three crucial documents: Roadmap to Development (2006-2010), Implementation Blueprint (2012-2016) and the BIMP-EAGA Vision 2025 (2017-2025) (Raharjo, 2019). These key blueprints outline the initiative's "strategic pillars", primary economic sectors and crucial projects that would actualise the BIMP-EAGA vision for a "resilient, inclusive, sustainable and economically competitive subregion".

Beyond their own internal cooperation, these ASEAN sub-regions have increasingly become areas of cooperation among ASEAN's external partners. Among these partners is China, which has strong cooperation with its neighbouring Southeast Asia. While China's engagements with the IMT-GT and IMS-GT have been limited, its active involvement in the GMS has been extensively studied (Summers, 2008; Ishida, 2019). Nonetheless, its prolonged relationship with BIMP-EAGA has not been discussed extensively. From the time the BIMP-EAGA was introduced, China has been one of the non-ASEAN countries that has engaged with the BIMP-EAGA. In 2009, China and the BIMP-EAGA signed a Framework of Cooperation, making the former a 'strategic development partner' (Ngeow, 2021a). Although the cooperation between China and the BIMP-EAGA was limited in the early years, it has gradually increased in recent years. Notably after the introduction and the more active implementation of China's massive infrastructure development, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in the region. There have been attempts from both sides to promote more comprehensive and expansive cooperation. This was demonstrated by the first ministerial meeting between China and the BIMP-EAGA in 2018, which was followed by the second ministerial meeting in 2019, where the "Plan of Action for BIMP-EAGA China Cooperation 2020-2025" was ratified (Hashim and Julay, 2021). According to the document, China and the member states of the BIMP-EAGA agreed to expand their cooperation not only in the political and diplomatic spheres but also in new areas such as the environment, digital economy and poverty alleviation (Hashim and Julay, 2021). A better example of the growing engagement between China and the BIMP-EAGA can be

identified in the “ASEAN-China Joint Statement on Synergising the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative”, which was adopted in Bangkok in 2019 (Hashim and Julay, 2021). The document mentions the BIMP-EAGA as one of the ASEAN sub-regions where the implementation of the BRI would be enhanced.

In general, existing studies focus on China’s relations with ASEAN or with individual member countries (Abdullah, 2016; Lu and Zuojun, 2018; Rakhmat and Pashya, 2022). With regards to China’s cooperation with the ASEAN sub-region, most studies concentrate on its role as one of the members of the GMS (Summers, 2008; Ishida, 2019). Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to the existing lacuna by examining China’s engagement with the BIMP-EAGA. It does not only examine the progress of the cooperation on different spheres of its focus, but it also analyses the various challenges which stand in the way of a more comprehensive and multi-faceted engagement. The paper argues that while the BIMP-EAGA has become a multilateral avenue for China to engage with the sub-region and the member countries, the cooperation has been limited. This is principally due to three main factors, namely China’s preference to engage with these countries bilaterally, the existence of more matured cooperative frameworks that have facilitated China’s relations with the sub-regional countries, along with the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea between China and the BIMP-EAGA nations.

## **2. Chinese interests regarding the BIMP-EAGA**

The government in Beijing first demonstrated its commitment to supporting the BIMP-EAGA during the 9th ASEAN Summit in Bali on 8 October 2003 (Riyanto, 2015: 29). The commitment, nonetheless, was manifested with the signing of the Framework of Economic Cooperation between China and the BIMP-EAGA countries six years later on 24 October 2009 in Thailand (Ngeow, 2021a). The deal was signed by the then Chinese Minister of Commerce, Lu Kejian, along with Brunei’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Dato Lim Jock Hoi, the Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, Raldi Koestoer; Malaysia’s Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister’s Department,

Malaysia, Razali bin Che Mat, as well as Merly M. Cruz, Undersecretary, Department of Trade and Industry, the Philippines (BIMP-EAGA, 2019).

The agreement stipulates that both sides intend to cooperate on a number of areas, including forestry, agriculture, tourism, fisheries, energy and mineral exploration, the development of human resources, renewable energy and finance (BIMP-EAGA, 2019). Moreover, the framework also outlines how the cooperation in these sectors would be conducted. These include dialogues, joint studies, promotion and development, investments, information exchange, research and development, education and training. The ministers who signed the agreement also agreed to organise yearly senior-level meetings to plan, implement and/or review the progress of their cooperation, as well as identifying new priorities and directions (BIMP-EAGA, 2019).

China's eagerness to cooperate with the BIMP-EAGA since the early years is not surprising. In historical terms, China has always viewed the ASEAN as a crucial region in its foreign policy (Swee-Hock, 2007). As China began to reform its economy in the late 1970s under Deng Xiaoping, the government in Beijing understood that it needed to maintain its foothold in its own backyard (Allison, 2017). Khong (2019) notes that "Asia is where China must establish its prestige or reputation for power". China has thus placed Southeast Asia at the core of its geopolitical ambitions and has initiated a number of attempts to expand its foothold in the region (Kolmas, 2016). In Beijing's view, it needs to attract the countries within its sphere of influence via stronger cooperation and through various regional frameworks. The BIMP-EAGA is viewed as one of the ways to bring China and ASEAN countries together by means of regional economic development (Vaughn and Morrison, 2006: 34).

In addition, a number of academics in China also suggest that since the early 1990s, China has been trying to minimise American suspicions concerning its ambitions. China's embrace of the BIMP-EAGA has been considered by the government in Beijing as a means to demonstrate its acceptance of the pluralistic concepts of regionalism, which parallels the US' idea of "open regionalism" (Cheng, 2013: 317). From the 1990s

until the 2000s, China's regional stance was to circumvent confrontations pertaining to Washington's core interests, with the Chinese government believing that sub-regional cooperation is not likely to pose considerable threat to the US. In this context, China's engagement with the ASEAN's sub-regional frameworks, such as the BIMP-EAGA, provides Beijing with more sway as it does not directly compete with the other cooperative schemes (Li, 2005: 113). With the economic orientation of the BIMP-EAGA excluding military or security partnership, the sub-regional arrangement tends not to be sensitive towards the US. Moreover, although the BIMP-EAGA and other sub-regional frameworks are also open to the US, its engagement is not always fruitful and effective. As Cheng (2013: 317) notes, the US prefers to maintain its foothold in the ASEAN by way of supporting larger regional frameworks. Regarding Beijing, in the midst of formidable American influence, the BIMP-EAGA, which relies more on geographical proximity and close networks, presents opportunities.

With the exception of factors related to China-US relations, various experts also note that since the beginning of the 1990s, China has been successful in maintaining ties with the ASEAN (Cheng, 2013: 317). Nonetheless, it is generally acknowledged that there is limited mutual trust between both nations. Certain ASEAN countries are concerned with the potential economic competition with China, which would weaken the capability of the ASEAN or its member countries in its own regional frameworks (Li, 2006: 63). This threat is heightened by unresolved territorial disputes between China and a number of the ASEAN states, as well as the economic dominance of the ethnic-Chinese communities in the ASEAN countries, which are often viewed as troublesome. As regards China, it believes that cooperating with the BIMP-EAGA will contribute to strengthening mutual trust. The BIMP-EAGA should be seen as limiting China's advantage in terms of economies of scale as it includes only a few provinces. The BIMP-EAGA is also expected to expand cooperation networks involving state and non-state actors. Lastly, the government in Beijing regards the BIMP-EAGA as involving fewer concessions than government-to-government or regional agreements, enabling China to avoid sensitive

issues such as territorial disputes relatively easily (Chen, 2001: 148).

In recent years, particularly after the initiation of the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), China sees the goals of the BIMP-EAGA, which focus on economic development in specific underdeveloped areas of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, as being in accordance with the main activities of the BRI, which is investing in infrastructure development. Inaugurated in 2013, the BRI is China's ambitious plan to promote economic cooperation with countries around the world. The BRI's official goals are to promote five connectivities: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, along with people-to-people bonds. Although the BRI has a global reach and a wide scope, ASEAN has been its main priority since the beginning, with a significant number of BRI projects being implemented (Ujvari, 2019). As the four BIMP-EAGA countries are destinations for BRI projects, greater Chinese engagement in the BIMP-EAGA holds the prospect of strengthening the implementation of BRI in these countries.

Chinese interests in the BIMP-EAGA are also related to its stake in the four countries connected to the sub-region. For instance, Indonesia, as the largest ASEAN nation, has been one of China's closest partners in the region since the two established diplomatic cooperation in 1950 (Rakhmat, 2021a). The cooperation was suspended in 1967 due to Indonesia's concern over the spread of communism and was only resumed in 1990. Nonetheless, Indonesia and China have strong economic ties. The latter has consistently been the former's main trading partner, serving as its largest import and export market (Rakhmat and Pashya, 2022). At the same time, Indonesia is China's fourth largest trading partner (Umagapi, 2017: 136). Following the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, Indonesia has become a more important partner for China, as the latter occupies a strategic position in the project. A number of the BRI's flagship projects are currently being implemented in Indonesia and include the Morowali Industrial Park with an investment value of US\$1.63 billion in Sulawesi and the Bandung-Jakarta high-speed rail project with an investment value of US\$5.5 billion (Damuri et al., 2019). A further spectacular project China is



working on in Indonesia is the US\$17.8 billion Kayan River hydroelectric power plant. China's growing economic foothold in Indonesia have made some analysts and economists believe that the latter has become increasingly reliant on the latter (Rakhmat and Purnama, 2020).

A similar situation can also be observed in Malaysia, in which China has invested heavily. Following the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1974, the relationship between China and Malaysia has considerably improved (Yanqing, 2016: 117). Similar to Indonesia, Malaysia has been China's top trading partner within the ASEAN (Weiss, 2015). This has increased with the recent implementation of the BRI. Malaysia's exports to China hit a new record high in 2020, increasing 11.1% to US\$37.77 (RM159.84 billion) (Malaysia Investment Development Authority, 2021). In addition, China has also become Malaysia's largest source of imports, accounting for 21.5% of total imports. According to the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (2021), 243 projects from China with a total investment of US\$14.91 billion have been approved. Malaysia's importance to the BRI is also demonstrated with a number of Chinese major firms, such as Huawei Technologies Co Ltd, Longi Solar Technology Co Ltd, JinkoSolar Holding Co Ltd, Alliance Steel, Alibaba Group Holding Ltd, besides Zhejiang Geely Holding Group Co Ltd establishing their operations in Malaysia (Peng, 2022). A number of the BRI flagship projects are currently being implemented in Malaysia, including oil and gas pipeline projects, property constructions, the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), the Malaysia-Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP), in addition to the Kuala Lumpur and Singapore Railway Project (Liu and Lim, 2019: 216). In relation to China, the completion of these projects would enable it to secure alternative logistic routes to minimise its over-reliance on the strategic Malacca Strait chokepoint.

China's interest in collaborating with the BIMP-EAGA are not only focused on Indonesia and Malaysia, but it is also related to its long and fruitful relationship with Brunei Darussalam. The two countries have maintained a relatively strong relationship regarding various spheres since the inception of the diplomatic cooperation many years ago



(Strangio, 2020). With the introduction of the BRI, Brunei has become even more important in China's foreign policy calculations. In 2017, Chinese Ambassador to Brunei, Yang Jian, said "Brunei is an important country along the 21st century Maritime Silk Road" (Reuters, 5th March 2018). He also asserted that since the BRI was announced by the Chinese government, a large number of Chinese companies had expressed interest in investing in Brunei. To date, China has significant investments in Brunei's IT industry, oil and gas, agriculture, tourism, as well as the fast-growing halal food industry. Recently, China completed the first phase of the industrial development projects on the island of Muara Besar. The project, which is being undertaken by a Chinese company, Hengyi Group, is said to be the largest foreign investment project that Brunei has ever established (Peery, 2018).

The Philippines is another BIMP-EAGA country that has long ties with China. Although prior to the 1970s, Manila had no relations with Beijing due to its close ties with Taiwan and saw China as a security threat, it eventually began considering relations with China in the later phase of 1970s (Hong, 2012: 57). The two countries finally established formal diplomatic relations on 9 June 1975 with the signing of the Joint Communiqué. Subsequently, China-Philippines relations have generally remained cordial in many spheres (Hong, 2012: 57). Likewise, with the implementation of the BRI, the relationship between Beijing and Manila has grown even stronger. Despite its maritime dispute with China over the West Philippine Sea, a disputed section of the South China Sea adjacent to the Philippines eastern coast, a number of large BRI projects are currently being implemented in the Philippines, including the Subic-Clark train construction project being carried out by China Harbour Engineering Co and other transportation-related infrastructure projects, various real estate projects, investments in IT and communication industry, together with several renewable energy projects (De Castro, 2019). Similar to other BIMP-EAGA countries, China views the Philippines as a crucial nation in the implementation of the BRI.

Given that China has been the largest trading partner and investor as regards the BIMP-EAGA member countries over the past several years, it is not surprising that China was among one of the first countries to

engage with the BIMP-EAGA from the early days of its inception. This is combined with the implementation of the BRI in all four countries, which have been receptive to the initiative due to the convergence of interests between the BRI's objectives and the domestic political and economic goals of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. China perceives the creation of the BIMP-EAGA as a crucial multilateral platform to engage, particularly in regard to strengthening cooperation with the four countries.

### **3. Progress and Obstacles**

Although China has a long established relationship with the BIMP-EAGA, the reality on the ground demonstrates that after the announcement of China's commitment to support the implementation of the BIMP-EAGA, both sides have failed to exhibit any significant development (Ngeow, 2021a). Generally, there are four primary signs that reveal that the collaboration between China and BIMP-EAGA is relatively superficial.

First, most of the agreements between China and the BIMP-EAGA are only agreed on paper without any concrete action plan regarding their implementation. In the early 2000s, the two sides signed a Framework of Cooperation document which affirms China's position as a "strategic development partner" (BIMP-EAGA, 2009). Nonetheless, as Ngeow (2021a) remarked, there was no significant development afterward. The subsequent cooperation has only revolved around meetings and participating and organising various events such as: 1) the BIMP-EAGA's participation in the China-ASEAN Expo (CAExpo) in 2004 and 2005; 2) the holding of the BIMP-EAGA - China Trade and Economic Seminar during CAExpo 2004; 3) The BIMP-EAGA's participation in the ASEAN-China Investment Seminar and Site Visit in September 2012; 4) the hosting of Chinese journalists in 2012, covering places of interests in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei; and 5) China's and the BIMP-EAGA's participation in the 14th CAExpo in 2017, where 70 participants from the BIMP-EAGA participated in a capacity-building event on ICT, tourism, environment, agriculture and e-commerce (ASEAN-China Centre, 2017).

Secondly, collaborations between China and the BIMP-EAGA are still in the statement of intent phase and until 2022, there has been no report showing the implementation of these agreements. After 2017, there are several developments that illustrate the expansion of the relationship between China and the BIMP-EAGA. During the 14th CAExpo in 2017, both parties realised the potential expansion of collaboration into the fields of education, manufacturing, tourism, agriculture, energy, infrastructure, fisheries, human resources development, as well as trade and investments (ASEAN, 2018). The event also resulted in a number of Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) with respect to these sectors. Nevertheless, the only reported activity is that since 2016, in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), China has hosted a number of technical and capacity building programmes for BIMP-EAGA officials, such as “Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as Catalysts for Economic Corridors, Value Chains and Production Networks Training,” “Economic Corridor Development for Competitive and Inclusive Asia Training,” besides “Training on Tourism Management in the BIMP-EAGA and GMS” (ADB-PRC Regional Knowledge Sharing Initiative, 2019).

Simultaneously, China and the BIMP-EAGA have also agreed to upgrade the mechanism of engagement to the Ministerial level. This has taken place in the form of the first ministerial-level meeting in Kuala Belait, Brunei Darussalam and the second ministerial-level meeting in November 2019 in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia (ASEAN, 2018). In actual fact, during the 2019 meeting, China and the BIMP-EAGA adopted the Plan of Action for the BIMP-EAGA China Cooperation 2020-2025 (BIMP-EAGA, 2019). The plan aimed to expand the cooperation areas beyond the ones identified in the 2009 Framework of Cooperation to new spheres which included poverty alleviation and digital economy, while exploration of minerals and finance were removed from the 2009 list (Ngeow, 2021a). Further issues that were raised during the meeting are the needs for transparency on non-tariff measures, regulations and the procedural requirements related to trade (Ngeow, 2021a). Yet, to this date, there is no further information on how these plans and agreements are actually being achieved.

Ngeow (2021a) writes that China's eagerness to engage with the BIMP-EAGA in the recent years can be seen in the recent statements emerging from Beijing. Examples are their joint statements with Brunei and Malaysia, as well as Xi Jinping's speech in late 2020, where the BIMP-EAGA was identified as a primary area of cooperation between China and the ASEAN (Ngeow, 2021a). Moreover, the ASEAN-China Joint Statement on Synergising the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative, which was adopted in Bangkok in 2019, also acknowledges the BIMP-EAGA as a significant area and aims to connect the sub-region to the BRI via the development of the BIMP-EAGA economic corridors (ASEAN, 2019). The government in Beijing has also established consulate offices in the four BIMP-EAGA countries, indicating that China now has a significant consular presence in the BIMP-EAGA (Ngeow, 2021a). As with the previous indicators, these spoken promises in the form of joint statements and consular presence have not been directly translated into the concrete manifestation of factual and fruitful cooperation on the ground. How these efforts will play a role in the implementation of the China-BIMP-EAGA cooperation remains difficult to determine.

Thirdly, there have also been plans to provide grants, loans and investments from China to the BIMP-EAGA. However, they remain saccharine promises. During the second ministerial meeting, both sides discussed the possibility of China providing a grant for the BIMP-EAGA to be employed in several joint projects in transportation, industrial capacity, the health industry and other fields (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019). In addition, the China Development Bank planned to launch a US\$5 billion special loan for the collaboration between China and the BIMP-EAGA. By way of these funds, the hope is to strengthen cooperation among local governments and private actors from China and the BIMP-EAGA countries. The government in Beijing also expressed the need for China's Chamber of Commerce and business councils of the BIMP countries to form joint business associations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019). Another illustration is Davao which is considered by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi as a "pilot

city” for China and the BIMP-EAGA partnership. In a statement during the inauguration of the Chinese Consulate General in Davao in November 2018, Wang commented that China plans to assist the speeding up of economic development in Mindanao through the BIMP-EAGA framework (Minda News, 30th October 2018). Although the above developments are a useful follow-up, once again, to date, there has been no update on whether these funds have actually been distributed.

Fourthly, the lukewarm responses and attempts from the Chinese and the BIMP-EAGA officials to take tangible action have prompted the academic community to raise concerns. Conversations regarding all promises and commitments between China and the BIMP-EAGA have been taken over by universities and research institutions with expectations to reignite enthusiasm among relevant stakeholders and to ensure that the wider community benefits from the China-BIMP-EAGA ties. In September 2017, for instance, a seminar entitled “Strengthening Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) and China Trade & Investment Cooperation” was organised in Guangxi (ASEAN-China Centre, 2017). The seminar, which was co-organised by ASEAN-China Centre (ACC), BIMP-Facilitation Centre and China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, was attended by over 300 state and business representatives from China and the BIMP-EAGA countries. During the seminar, they primarily discussed the inclusion of China in the implementation of BIMP-EAGA Vision 2025, specifically exchanging views on ways Chinese enterprises can take to expand their presence in the BIMP-EAGA and on favourable investment policies and development opportunities in regional countries.

**Table 1. China's engagements with the BIMP-EAGA**

Years	Activities
2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China first demonstrated its commitment to support the implementation of the BIMP-EAGA during the 9th ASEAN Summit in Bali.</li> </ul>
2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China sent its Special Mission to the BIMP-EAGA.</li> <li>- Participation of the BIMP-EAGA in the China-ASEAN Expo (CAEExpo).</li> <li>- BIMP-EAGA-China Trade and Economic Seminar.</li> </ul>
2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participation of the BIMP-EAGA in the China-ASEAN Expo (CAEExpo).</li> </ul>
2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China-BIMP-EAGA Framework of Cooperation was signed.</li> </ul>
2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participation of the BIMP-EAGA in the ASEAN-China Investment Seminar and Site Visit.</li> <li>- BIMP-EAGA's hosting of Chinese journalists.</li> </ul>
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China and ADB hosted technical and capacity building programmes for various BIMP-EAGA officials.</li> </ul>
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Investment Seminar and Business Matching in Nanning, which resulted in the signing of a MoU.</li> <li>- China and BIMP-EAGA meeting during the 14th CAEExpo on possible collaboration in education, agriculture and e-commerce.</li> <li>- A seminar entitled: "Strengthening Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) and China Trade &amp; Investment Cooperation" was held in Guangxi.</li> </ul>
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The First Ministerial Meeting between China and the BIMP-EAGA.</li> <li>- The selection of Davao as a "pilot city".</li> </ul>
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Second Ministerial Meeting between China and the BIMP-EAGA, which resulted in the Plan of Action for BIMP-EAGA China Cooperation.</li> <li>- BIMP-EAGA was identified in the ASEAN-China Joint Statement on Synergising the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative.</li> <li>- China planned to launch a US\$5 billion special loan for its cooperation with the BIMP-EAGA.</li> <li>- China expressed the need for cooperation between China's Chamber of Commerce and the BIMP-EAGA Business Councils.</li> <li>- China and ADB hosted workshops for BIMP-EAGA officials "Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as Catalysts for Economic Corridors, Value Chains and Production Networks Training," "Economic Corridor Development for Competitive and Inclusive Asia Training," and "Training on Tourism Management in the BIMP-EAGA and GMS".</li> </ul>
2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- BIMP-EAGA was identified as a primary area of cooperation between China and the ASEAN in China's joint statements with Brunei and Malaysia.</li> <li>- A webinar entitled: "Boosting Trade and Economic Ties in the Post-Pandemic Era between the BIMP-EAGA and China" was organised by China-ASEAN Research Institute and University of Malaya's Institute of China Studies.</li> </ul>

Source: Compiled by Author.

In November 2020, a webinar was also organised by the China-ASEAN Research Institute and University of Malaya's Institute of China Studies (Institute of China Studies, 20th November 2020). The event

aimed to discuss the challenges of China-BIMP-EAGA collaboration and how both sides could strengthen their partnership. Another example in which a webinar was jointly organised by the BIMP-EAGA national secretariats and China's Ministry of Commerce, took place in December 2021 (BIMP-EAGA, 2021). The webinar, entitled "Boosting Trade and Economic Ties in the Post-Pandemic Era between the BIMP-EAGA and China," discussed various opportunities and programmes that can be established to enhance cooperation between China and BIMP-EAGA. During the meeting, it was agreed that both sides need to strengthen cooperation on post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery, province-to-province cooperation, information technology and to employ the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and China-ASEAN Free Trade Area.

As Table 1 shows, the cooperation between China and the BIMP-EAGA has been relatively limited. Most of the engagements revolve around meetings and planning, without significant implementation. There are three obstacles that have led to the limited implementation of China-BIMP-EAGA relations. First, China appears to want to cooperate more with the four BIMP-EAGA countries bilaterally than multilaterally. As explained in the previous section, China's ties with Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have gone smoothly since formal diplomatic cooperation was formalised. In recent years, the relations have not only increased significantly, but also, they have expanded into different sectors. Economically, China is the primary trading partner and investor of these four countries. Analysts even suggest that countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia are now heavily economically reliant on China (Rakhmat and Purnama, 2020). It should also be mentioned that these countries have additionally forged greater cooperation with China in political and cultural spheres. Military cooperation has also taken place in the forms of joint military exercises and equipment purchases (Cai, 2016: 89). Moreover, setting aside territorial disputes in the South China Sea in exchange for promises of aid and vaccines, the four nations are now some of the largest users of Sinovac Biotech's COVID-19 vaccines (Peng, 2021). Given that this growing cooperation has taken place bilaterally, the BIMP-EAGA has



not been the main focus of China's foreign policy towards these countries. Its engagement with the sub-region can be considered as part of its diplomatic move to bolster its bilateral cooperation with Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

The second obstacle which hinders strong cooperation between China and the BIMP-EAGA is that there are more mature institutional frameworks that have facilitated Beijing's ties with ASEAN countries, including the four member states of the BIMP-EAGA. One of these frameworks is the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) which was created in 2010 (Devadason, 2010). Under the agreement, the average tariff rate on goods from China sold in the ASEAN countries decreased from 12.8 to 0.6 percent and the average tariff rate on ASEAN goods sold in China declined from 9.8 to 0.1 percent (Chung, 2016). It is reported that the FTA has accelerated the growth of commercial and investment activities between China and the ASEAN countries (Yang and Martinez-Zarzoso, 2014). Besides the ACFTA, China has also signed bilateral joint frameworks with the BIMP-EAGA countries that in turn, has enhanced their cooperation in all sectors. For example, China and Indonesia signed the Bilateral Economic and Trade Cooperation Agreement (BETC) in 2011 (Rakhmat, 2021a). Both countries are currently in the process of turning the BETC into a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) which will increase commercial exchanges between Jakarta and Beijing (Rakhmat, 2021a).

With Malaysia, China signed a framework agreement for comprehensive bilateral cooperation, which is considered as the first notable agreement since the two formed diplomatic ties in 1974 (Ngeow, 2021b). In 2013, both countries upgraded their cooperation to a "comprehensive strategic partnership which led to China displacing Singapore as Malaysia's largest trading partner and has remained in that position ever since" (Ngeow, 2021b). In 2000, Beijing and Manila signed a joint statement on the Framework of Bilateral Cooperation in the Twenty-First Century in which the two countries to pursue long-term relations on various sectors (De Castro, 2009). These frameworks have been complemented with numerous other bilateral agreements and MoUs between China and the four BIMP-EAGA countries (Wong et al.,

2006). In this context, the cooperation between China and the BIMP-EAGA countries has been facilitated by various institutional frameworks at both regional and bilateral levels. Therefore, in essence, the government in Beijing sees the BIMP-EAGA as another institutional framework that could facilitate its entry into four ASEAN countries of importance. Nonetheless, notwithstanding various issues existing within the BIMP-EAGA which have hindered its complete success combined with the already existing frameworks that have facilitated China's cooperation with the sub-region member countries, the BIMP-EAGA is regarded as only an additional framework, not as a priority by both China and its members.

The limitations of China's relations with the BIMP-EAGA are also related to the South China Sea conflict between China and several ASEAN countries which remains a challenge to their cooperation. The South China Sea is waters surrounded by several countries in Southeast Asia. It is an exceedingly important geostrategic and economic area. Approximately 30% of world trade uses the Indian Ocean route to the Pacific Ocean through the South China Sea, and the wealth of natural resources in the form of oil and gas and fisheries proves how valuable these waters are (Hayton, 2014). China, through its Nine Dash Line claim, believes that 90% of the area of the South China Sea belongs to China (Zhiguo and Bing, 2013: 98-99). This is based on the Chinese government's statement which stated that thousands of years ago, the South China Sea was a fishing ground for their ancestors (Zhiguo and Bing, 2013: 98-99). This resulted in various countries in the ASEAN, such as Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia firmly rejecting China's unilateral claim and prioritising the division of the South China Sea as regulated in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982. China itself rejected the decision of the 1982 UNCLOS and favoured the Nine Dash Line claim based on the history of its country. This unfounded unilateral claim by China has led to a protracted conflict since the 1970s and has not yet been resolved (Kreuzer, 2015).

All four countries of the BIMP-EAGA have some degree of disagreement with China in this area. Although Indonesia is not a

claimant state in the South China Sea tensions, Chinese ships have frequently been discovered trespassing Indonesian waters and Chinese coast guard vessels and fishing boats enter the archipelago's territories (Connelly, 2016: 2-4). In December 2020, for example, a Chinese underwater surveillance drone was discovered within the territory (The Guardian, 31st December 2020). In 2021, the Indonesian Ocean Justice Initiative (IOJI) also detected a China Coast Guard ship sailing around the Noble Clyde Boudreaux drilling rig, the Tuna Block oil and gas exploration area, in the Natuna Sea (Strait Times, 11th December 2021). The government in Jakarta has often expressed its concern (Meyer et al., 2019: 11-12), while the Indonesian military frequently engages in tensions with their Chinese counterparts (Nabbs-Keller, 2020). In addition, the government in Kuala Lumpur has summoned China to a protest against Chinese ships entering its maritime economic zone (The Jakarta Post, 5th October 2021). Malaysian Navy auxiliary vessels were reported to be in close contact with the China Coast Guard fleet as China interrupted Malaysian hydrocarbon exploration off the coast of Sarawak (Reuters, 14th July 2020). Furthermore, China Coast Guard vessels have previously been reported to be operating only a few miles from Sarawak (Noor, 2016).

The same is applicable to Brunei, which has claims to Louisa Reef, Owen Shoal and Rifleman Bank and declared them in 1984 as features in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Storey, 2018: 5). On 20 July 2020, after being silent on the issue, Brunei's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it "maintains its two-step approach in addressing the South China Sea" (Salleh et al., 2021: 8). The move was considered a breakthrough on how Brunei views the increasing role of China in the region. Its two-step approach proposes the 1982 UN Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct as the main mechanisms to reduce the tension in the South China Sea. Not only Brunei, China's relations with the Philippines have also been in decline since 2009 when Beijing attempted to encroach on the Philippines sides of the South China Sea (De Castro, 2015). The government in Manila strongly opposed China's claims and approached the UN with the issue. Beijing has also prevented the Philippines from

fishing and pursuing energy projects in the areas (De Castro, 2015). The two have also used their law enforcement agencies to end each other's activities. Under UNCLOS, the Philippines even initiated arbitration proceedings against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague (UNCLOS) (Lunn and Lang, 2016: 25). The Philippines has filed 84 diplomatic grievances against China since 2016, alleging unlawful fishing, the presence of the Coast Guard in its waters, and obstructing petroleum exploration operations (The Jakarta Post, 29th May 2021). These incidents exacerbate tensions between the two countries.

The effectiveness of China's engagement with the BIMP-EAGA has been hamstrung by its overlapping territorial and maritime disputes with all four of the BIMP-EAGA countries. While the South China Sea tensions do not completely impede cooperation between China and the BIMP-EAGA countries as this section shows, it has limited the cooperation from achieving its full potential. Any worsening of the tensions could have a detrimental impact on the cooperation. In general, while the cooperation between China and the BIMP-EAGA countries has intensified in recent years, obstacles remain which have hampered the complete attainment of the relations.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The principal objective of this paper is to examine the progress and obstacles in China's relations with the BIMP-EAGA. Chinese political and economic interests have made it one of the original external partners of the BIMP-EAGA. While the BIMP-EAGA has become an avenue for China in cooperating with the ASEAN and the sub-regional member countries, the relations have been limited. This paper has ascertained that the cooperation between China and the BIMP-EAGA has revolved around discussing potential spheres and signing agreements, without concrete implementation. There are three main obstacles the paper identifies that have hindered China-BIMP-EAGA cooperation from attaining its potential: First, in previous years, China's relations with the four countries operated smoothly at the bilateral level. Till now, Beijing does not perceive the BIMP-EAGA to be a priority. Rather, it views the subregional framework only as another framework to be engaged in, an

attempt to strengthen its bilateral ties with the four BIMP-EAGA countries. Secondly, institutional frameworks that are more mature and have facilitated China's cooperation with the BIMP-EAGA countries, for example the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area and other bilateral frameworks are in existence at both bilateral and regional levels. Lastly, there are ongoing territorial and maritime disputes between China and the BIMP-EAGA countries. While the tensions do not necessarily prevent the cooperation, it has, to some extent, hindered the collaboration from meaningful development.

Against this backdrop, China and the BIMP-EAGA need to identify ways to make their cooperation more meaningful. Even though there are already existing cooperative frameworks that have facilitated the relationship between China and the BIMP-EAGA member countries, the BIMP-EAGA's emphasis on expanding private sector networks could lead to stronger cooperation between private actors from both sides in forging joint venture projects and forming a business-friendly environment which could benefit both countries. COVID-19 and post-pandemic economic recovery offer avenues for China and the BIMP-EAGA to enhance their cooperation. In many aspects, the BIMP-EAGA remains in need of socio-economic development. Disregarding Brunei, other BIMP-EAGA countries' per capita GDP ranks lower than their national averages. In this case, China has the resources and ability to support the BIMP-EAGA in various spheres such as technology, infrastructure, tourism and human resources. In doing so, it could also attain its trade and investment goals and expedite the implementation of the BRI in these countries. China could learn from other countries such as South Korea, which has established the ROK-BIMP-EAGA, a specific division under its Ministry of Foreign Affairs dedicated to strengthening South Korea's relations with the BIMP-EAGA. Finally, resolving ongoing territorial and maritime disputes is also paramount to the future of China-BIMP-EAGA collaboration. Without attempts to iron out the issues connected to the South China Sea, China's cooperation with the BIMP-EAGA will not be able to achieve its full potential.

## Notes

- \* Dr Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat is a Research Professor at Korea Institute for ASEAN Studies, Busan University of Foreign Studies. His research focuses on the cooperation between China, Indonesia and the Middle East. Dr Rakhmat holds a Ph.D in Politics from the University of Manchester.
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