

## **High-Level Visits and the Belt and Road Initiative: The Case of Southeast Asia**

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### **Abstract**

The study aims to examine the frequency of high-level visits between China and Southeast Asian countries from 2008 through 2019. It argues that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has encouraged diplomatic exchanges between China and Southeast Asian countries. However, the BRI is not the only reason that contributes to the high frequency of visits. The institutionalisation of bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanism between China and Southeast Asian countries has also increased the close bond between the two sides. Other reasons that affect the frequency of visits include cordial political relations between China and individual Southeast Asian countries. Although the BRI has encouraged mutual visits between China and Southeast Asian countries, the South China Sea dispute remains a challenge to the relations between China and other claimants in the region.

**Keywords:** *Belt and Road Initiative, China, Southeast Asia, high-level visits*

## 1. Introduction

Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, the high-level visits between China and Southeast Asian countries have increased significantly. On 26th and 27th April 2019, nine out of ten heads of state or government from Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup> gathered in Beijing to attend the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (*BRF*, 2019). Like Southeast Asian counterparts who have been busy travelling to China, Chinese leaders have also been flying frequently to Southeast Asia. On 2nd to 5th November 2019, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang was in Bangkok, Thailand to attend series of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) led summits and to pay an official visit to Thailand (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019). A number of agreements and deals were signed during these visits. It seems that the Chinese, as well as Southeast Asian leaders, have viewed high-level visits as a means to promote and enhance cooperation and collaboration under the BRI.

The BRI has attracted much attention from policymakers and academia since its launch. There is a burgeoning literature discussing its intentions and challenges (for example Cheng, 2016; Gan and Mao, 2016; Liu, 2017; Yu, 2017; Siu, 2019). Some examine its impacts and implications to an individual country (Shekhar, 2016; Fang, 2017; Hu, 2017; Choroś-Mrozowska, 2019), the regional as well as the international order (Arase, 2015; Zhang, 2016; Chen *et al.*, 2019; Yuan, 2019). However, there is, so far, no analysis on the impacts of the BRI on high-level visits.

Leadership travel can be a “good indicator” to understand a country's diplomatic priorities and commitments in its foreign relation (Kastner and Saunders, 2012). Close political and economic relations

between China and Southeast Asian countries have increased the frequency of high-level exchanges in the 2000s. Exchanges of visits between the two sides have further accelerated after the launch of the BRI. This study attempts to answer the following research questions. *Does the BRI encourage more high-level visits between Chinese and Southeast Asian leaders? What are the implications of this growing high-level visits to China-ASEAN political and trade relations?*

To understand the impacts of the BRI on political relations between China and Southeast Asian countries, we have constructed a new data set that codes all high-level exchanges between Chinese and Southeast Asian leaders from 2008 to 2019. The frequency of visits by Chinese and Southeast Asian leaders during the second term of Hu-Wen administration (2008-2012) will be compared with the visits during the first term and part of the second term of the Xi-Li administration (2013-2019). We argue that the BRI has encouraged diplomatic exchanges between China and Southeast Asian countries. For China, its leaders visit Southeast Asia to promote greater cooperation with the region under the BRI. While for Southeast Asian leaders, their frequent China trips reflect their eagerness for more Chinese investment and trade.

This article begins with a review of the function of high-level visits in diplomacy and the diplomatic relations between ASEAN and China. It is then followed by a description of the collected data. The third section is a detailed analysis of all high-level exchanges between China and Southeast Asian countries between 2008 and 2019. In the fourth section, the authors discuss the reasons contributing to the increasing number of visits and challenges that arise. It is concluded that the BRI has encouraged mutual visits between China and Southeast Asian countries.

## **2. High-level Diplomatic Visits**

High-level visits are the most common forms of diplomatic engagement between two countries to develop and to enhance bilateral relations. They usually involve a head of state or government making a trip to another foreign country. High-level visits between countries reflect the importance of a bilateral relationship. It can appear in various forms: state visit, official visit, working visit, and private visit.

State visit is the highest form of visit offered by a host head of state to another chief of state such as the President or the king. It is characterised by higher ceremonial content such as a motorcade, a stay at a royal residence, a state banquet, and a speech to the house of parliament. These formality and protocol reflect the highest level of hospitality and honour in relations between states. The second highest rank of visit is the official visit offered to a head of government such as prime minister. Sometimes it is called goodwill visit or official goodwill visit. It includes the invitation to attend multilateral meetings and summits such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN Plus Three (10+3) and G20 as well as ceremonies like official ceremonies of sports shows. It is followed by a working visit, an official meeting between ministerial level officer with his counterpart to discuss issues concerning both countries. The last type of visit is the private visit, i.e. a visit by a chief of state, head of government or any other ministerial officers to another country without the invitation of the host government.

Face-to-face meetings during high-level visits can be a form of dialogue that allows information exchange, trust and rapport building. Eventually, it enhances understanding and promotes cooperation amongst leaders. Leaders also negotiate for good deals and break the deadlock when they meet as these leaders are the chief policymakers in

diplomacy. The practice of a leader's personal approach in diplomacy is sometimes called "presidential diplomacy." It usually involves a direct and personal execution of foreign policy by a nation's leader such as presidents and prime ministers while avoiding the traditional foreign policy bureaucracy led by foreign ministers (See CQ Press (ed.), 2013). While foreign visits do not necessarily tell the quality or content of bilateral relation, they provide valuable clues to understand a country's foreign policy aims and tendencies (Kastner and Saunders, 2012)

The shifting role of leaders in international diplomacy has called for a re-examination of high-level exchange in international politics. Nitsch (2007) examines the effects of state and official visits on bilateral trade. His results show that high-level exchanges indeed have a positive effect on bilateral exports growth.

There are also studies that investigate the geostrategic implications of high-level visits. Kastner and Saunders (2012) investigate China's behaviour through the study of the travel pattern of Chinese leaders. Ekmecki and Yildirim (2013) provide a detailed analysis of Turkish foreign policy through an examination of its Prime Minister Erdogan's foreign visits to the non-Western world between 2003 and 2010. According to Zakhirova's study (2012), intergovernmental visits can serve to provide important information on a region.

### **3. Overview of the Relations between China and Southeast Asian States**

Southeast Asian states have a long history of interactions with China given their historical, cultural and geographical proximity. However, the relations between the two sides have not been easy in the 20th century. In the height of the Cold War, China's radical foreign policies that supported local communist insurgencies in the region had created a tense

relationship between China and Southeast Asian countries. To prevent the further spread of communism in Southeast Asia, ASEAN was established in 1967. None of ASEAN's founding members had normal relations with China when they formed the organisation.

However, in the 1970s, a few new developments in the region and China had provided opportunities for China and Southeast Asian states to improve their relations. First, the normalisation of relations between the United States and China in 1972 had changed the regional strategic environment. Second, the intervention of Vietnam into Cambodia had prompted some Southeast Asian countries to reconsider their relations with China. Third, China had experienced a leadership change after the death of Mao Zedong. When Deng Xiaoping rose to power, China introduced Open and Reform Policy in 1979. Trade and economic matters have then become the new foundation of bilateral relations between China and Southeast Asian states. Seeing these changes in the region, some Southeast Asian countries quickly normalised relations with Beijing. Among all, Malaysia was the first ASEAN member state to form diplomatic relations with China in 1974. It was then followed by Thailand and the Philippines in 1975.

China and Southeast Asian states have gradually engaged in high-level exchanges as their relations become closer. These visits have contributed greatly to China's bilateral relations with Southeast Asian countries as well as its multilateral ties with the ASEAN, the regional organisation of Southeast Asia. It has formed a comprehensive strategic partnership with Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam (2013), the all-round cooperation partnership with Singapore (2015), and the comprehensive strategic cooperation with the Philippines (2018).

Meanwhile, its multilateral relations with the region is mainly built on ASEAN. China established dialogue partner relations with ASEAN

in 1991<sup>2</sup>. In 2003, China-ASEAN relations entered a new phase when Beijing acceded to the Treaty of Amity, Cooperation in Southeast Asia. It then became ASEAN strategic partners. Since then their relations have been multi-dimensional – from politics and security, economic to social and cultural aspects. Among all, China-ASEAN economic relations in particular trade and investments have gained the greatest success, forming the strongest pillar in bilateral relations between the two sides. China signed the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation with ASEAN in 2002, making it the first dialogue partner to set up a Free Trade Area with ASEAN. The ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) was realised in January 2010 and took full effect in January 2015. Both parties then agreed to upgrade the ACFTA in November 2015. The upgrading of the ACFTA will further simplify the rules for trade of goods, services, and investments in the region. Thus, enhancing regional trade and investment cooperation.

China has been ASEAN's largest trading partner since 2009, and ASEAN became China's second-largest trading partner in the first half of 2019 (*China Daily*, 23 July 2019). Since 2012, ASEAN and China together with South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, and India have jointly launched the negotiation for a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement that aims to integrate the economies of 16 countries in Asia and Oceania (ASEAN, 2016c).

Over the years, ASEAN and China have developed a comprehensive relation that covers political and security, economics and trade, and socio-cultural cooperation. However, the overlapping territorial claims between Southeast Asian states and China in the South China Sea have recently strained their close relationships.

#### 4. Data Description

The data consists of all state and official visits by the heads of state and government of China and Southeast Asian countries from 2008 through 2019. It spans across two generations of Chinese leaders, the second term of the then Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao (from 2008 to 2012) as well as the first and part of the second term of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang (from 2013 to 2019)<sup>3</sup>. These two sets of data provide a means of comparing the pattern in Chinese leaderships travel.

For Southeast Asian countries, the China trips made by the heads of state and government of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam are included<sup>4</sup>. Private visits such as Cambodian King Norodom Sihamoni's trips to Beijing every year for a routine medical check-up would not be included in the analysis<sup>5</sup>.

Southeast Asian states are heterogeneous in terms of their political systems. Brunei is an absolute monarchy with the king as the head of state. Laos and Vietnam are governed by a Communist one-party system. Thailand had been governed under military rule from late May 2014 till March 2019. On 24th March 2019, the country held its first national election in eight years, which later proved to be a setup for continued de facto military rule<sup>6</sup>. Singapore is under the one dominant party rule. Its neighbour Malaysia experienced the transfer of power after the opposition coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* won the 14th General Elections in May 2018, ending the 61 years ruling by the *Barisan Nasional* government. In contrast, Cambodia has transformed into a de facto one-party state after the ruling party, the Cambodia People's Party (CPP), won all 125 parliamentary seats in the 2018 national election<sup>7</sup> (Reuters, 15 August 2018). On the other hand, Indonesia and the



Philippines are under multi-party democratic systems. Myanmar has dropped the military rule since 2016 and joined the multi-party democratic system club. For the data collection, we have included China trips by both head of state and head of government from 2008 to 2019. Myanmar is a special case as we have included its State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi in the data. The post is similar to that of a Prime Minister. It was created by Myanmar's ruling party, National League for Democracy (NLD) party in April 2016 for its chairperson, Aung San Suu Kyi who is constitutionally barred from becoming the President of Myanmar<sup>8</sup>. For China, we include both Chinese President and Premier's trips to Southeast Asian countries from 2008 to 2019.

Data on high-level visits were obtained mainly from China's Foreign Ministry website<sup>9</sup>. The information was then cross-checked against Southeast Asian countries' ministry of foreign affairs, prime minister's or president's office, Chinese, Western and Southeast Asian local news media and scholarly writings to ensure the accuracy of the data. These news reports also provided additional information such as agreements and deals signed during the visits.

## **5. Analyses and Results**

Table 1 shows the frequency of Southeast Asian leaders' visits to China between 2008 and 2019. In total, Southeast Asian leaders travelled 112 times to China during the 12 years period. Between 2008 and 2012, during the second term of the Hu-Wen administration, they travelled 33 times to China, on average 6.6 times a year. Their visits to China almost doubled and reached 65 times during the first term of the Xi-Li administration (2013-2017). The highest frequency of visits occurred in 2014, where Southeast Asian leaders visited China 19 times in just a year. This reflects Southeast Asian countries' strategic calculation to

**Table 1** High-level Visits by Southeast Asian Leaders to China, 2008-2019

Country	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Brunei	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	7
Cambodia	1	1	1	0	1	1	3	2	3	2	0	2	17
Indonesia	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	2	0	0	6
Laos	1	1	0	1	2	2	3	1	3	1	0	0	15
Malaysia	0	1	0	1	1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	11
Myanmar	1	1	0	1	1	2	2	2	1	3	0	1	15
Philippines	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	6
Singapore	2	0	0	0	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	12
Thailand	3	1	1	0	1	0	2	0	2	1	0	1	12
Vietnam	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	11
Total	12	7	2	4	8	8	19	9	15	14	4	10	112

Source: The authors.

increase engagement with China after the launch of the BRI in October 2013. However, the frequency of their visits went back to the Hu-Wen administration level, which is around seven times a year during the first two years of the second term of the Xi-Li administration. Two possible reasons contribute to this reduction. First, there were growing criticism and scepticism over the BRI during the second term of Chinese President Xi Jinping. China was accused of putting the BRI participating countries in financial risk when Sri Lanka handover its southern deep-sea port of Hambantota to China for 99 years in December 2017 after its government failed to repay loans (*The New York Times*, 12 December 2017). In March 2018, the Centre for Global Development released a report that “raises serious concerns about sovereign debt sustainability in eight countries that have participated in the BRI projects” (Hurley *et al.*, 2018). Southeast Asian leaders have thus become less aggressive in wooing Chinese investment. Second, Southeast Asian countries have been busy holding elections in 2018 and 2019. Cambodia and Malaysia

held elections in 2018, while Thailand and Indonesia had their general elections in 2019.

Among all, Cambodian leaders were the most aggressive, travelling 17 times to China from 2008 to 2019. It was followed by Laos and Myanmar, in which their leaders both travelled 15 times to China. Leaders from Thailand and Singapore visited China 12 times from 2008 to 2019 respectively. Both Malaysian and Vietnamese leaders made 11 trips to China during the above period. Bruneian leaders visited China 7 times and followed by Indonesian and the Philippines leaders six times respectively from 2008 to 2019.

The table shows that Southeast Asian leaders have travelled more to China after the launch of BRI. The frequency of mutual visits from 2014 to 2019 was accelerated by trips for attending multilateral occasions as reflected in the statistics. Southeast Asian leaders have travelled to China during the period to attend multilateral meetings and occasions such as the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, the China-ASEAN Expo, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders' Meeting, G20 Meeting, the Boao Forum, and the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

In recent high-level exchanges between Southeast Asian countries and China, discussion of the BRI and its related activities featured prominently on the agenda of meetings. Different from symbolic goodwill visits in the past, recent visits by Southeast Asian leaders often concluded with the signing of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), cooperation agreements and deals for infrastructure projects under the BRI. For instance, during Malaysian Prime Minister Najib's state visit to China in November 2016, 14 agreements worth about RM150 billion (US\$34.4 billion) were signed (*New Straits Times*, 2 November 2016). Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen brought back US\$7 billion investment to Cambodia, including the construction of an expressway

**Table 2** Chinese Leaders' Visits to Southeast Asian Countries, 2008-2019

Country	Chinese Leaders	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total visits
Brunei	President	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3
	Premier	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Cambodia	President	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
	Premier	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	
Indonesia	President	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	5
	Premier	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	
Laos	President	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3
	Premier	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	
Malaysia	President	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
	Premier	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	
Myanmar	President	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
	Premier	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	
Philippines	President	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	3
	Premier	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	
Singapore	President	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
	Premier	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	
Thailand	President	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
	Premier	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	
Vietnam	President	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	4
	Premier	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>35</b>

Source: The authors.

from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville, another satellite city near Phnom Pen and the construction of a tourist centre from his China's trip in December 2017 (*VOA Khmer*, 5 December 2017).

On the other hand, Chinese leaders paid 35 visits to Southeast Asian countries from 2008 to 2019 as shown in Table 2. The data shows that current Chinese President Xi Jinping has travelled more extensively than his predecessor President Hu Jintao who only travelled three times to Southeast Asia from 2008 to 2012. From 2013 to 2017, during Xi's first term in office, he paid nine state visits to Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. He then travelled to Brunei and the

Philippines between 2018 and 2019, the first two years of his second term as Chinese President. In comparison, his predecessor President Hu Jintao only arranged state visits for Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore during his second term from 2008-2013.

The then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and current Chinese Premier Li Keqiang would visit at least one country in Southeast Asia every year to attend multilateral events, including APEC meetings, ASEAN Plus One, ASEAN Plus Three, East Asia Summit, and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders' Meeting. The latest multilateral meeting was the ASEAN series of summits held in Thailand in 2019 (ASEAN Secretariat – Thailand, 2019). In the 1990s, Chinese secondary leaders would attend these meetings; however, since 2000s top Chinese leaders appeared in these multilateral meetings themselves. The number of visits made by the current Chinese leaders was even higher than their predecessors.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang had travelled to almost all ASEAN countries between 2013 and 2019. Among all countries, the most visited Southeast Asian countries by them were Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. They have visited these countries three times between 2013 and 2019. In contrast, they only visited Myanmar once in 2014. Both Xi and Li have visited Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. Meanwhile, the Philippines and Vietnam were the two countries visited twice by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Since the Hu and Wen period (2009-2012), Chinese leaders have averagely visited three times a year to Southeast Asia. The average number of trips taken by Xi and Li appears to be consistent with Hu and Wen. However, Xi and Li's visits to Southeast Asian countries were more likely fruitful with the signing of a series of agreements. During Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to Hanoi, Vietnam from 12nd and 13rd November 2017, seven documents, 12 cooperation pacts and

83 trade agreements worth a combined value of US\$1.94 billion were signed (*Nhan Dan Online*, 13 November 2017). Chinese Premier Li Keqiang witnessed the signing of 14 agreements during his official visit to the Philippines in November 2017. These included a Renminbi bond issuance amounting to about US\$200 million and RMB150 million for the rehabilitation of Marawi City (*ABS-CBN News*, 15 November 2017).

## **6. Discussion**

The above analysis shows how the BRI has created a new impetus for China and Southeast Asian countries to deepen their relations through high-level visits. However, the initiative is not the only factor that contributes to the high frequency of visits. Other factors such as the institutionalisation of bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanism, close historical relationships between China and some Southeast Asian countries, the disputes in the South China Sea have also intensified the diplomatic exchanges between China and Southeast Asian countries. Nevertheless, closer relations between China and Southeast Asian countries do not mean that Southeast Asia has chosen China in the Sino-US rivalry.

### ***6.1. Building the BRI for Common Development***

Chinese leaders view Southeast Asia as a strategic region in implementing the BRI. Indeed, Chinese President, Xi Jinping first announced the creation of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to the Indonesian parliament during his state visit to Indonesia in October 2013. Later in the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road policy initiative released in March 2015, China includes Southeast Asia countries in two of the six corridors envisioned<sup>10</sup>. They are the China-

Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, running from southern China to Singapore and China-Myanmar-Bangladesh-India, linking Southern China to Myanmar. China places a strong emphasis on building trade routes from China to Southeast Asia in both land and sea routes.

As discussed above, mutual visits between Chinese and Southeast Asian leaders have increased after the launch of the BRI. For the Chinese leaders, high-level visits can be an effective way to promote this brand-new plan and to achieve the five major goals of the BRI, which are policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. They actively push for infrastructure development projects that promote strategic cooperation and contribute to connectivity in the region. For example, on 22nd April 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping witnessed the signing of the cooperation documents on high-speed rail projects from Jakarta to Bandung when he attended Asian-African summit in Jakarta (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Then a MoU to build 867km of dual-track railways in Thailand was signed during Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Thailand to attend the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) summit (Reuters, 19 December 2014). Most agreements and deals for building a railway network connecting the southern city of Kunming with Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore were reached during these mutual visits.

Concerns about the "Malacca Dilemma" have also led the Chinese leaders to work with the Malaysian government to push for port projects such as the Melaka Gateway<sup>11</sup> along the Straits of Malacca. Meanwhile, the Chinese government has also searched for an alternative route for its energy transportation. It has built an oil pipeline in Myanmar. In June 2017, it reached an agreement with the Myanmar government to develop a US\$7.3 billion deepwater port, the Bay of Bengal port at KyaukPyu. The port is part of the US\$10 billion KyaukPyu Special Economic Zone,

which will be developed by China's state-run CITIC Group (Reuters, 9 June 2017).

While Chinese leaders aim to promote the BRI through visits, Southeast Asian countries seek to obtain more infrastructure projects, enlarge and diversify trade with China through exchanges of visits. At a time when the global economy has slowed down, and the regional economy was clouded with uncertainties after the United States' withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free trade pact in January 2017, Southeast Asian countries see China as the main driver of economic growth in Asia. China's proximity and growing influence in the global economy, as well as commitments to fund the BRI infrastructure projects, provide good opportunities to Southeast Asian countries. To support the initiative, China has established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with US\$100 billion to fund infrastructure projects. It has also offered another US\$40 billion via the Silk Road Fund. At the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in May 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping committed an additional US\$14.5 billion to the Silk Road Fund (Xinhua, 14 May 2017). According to Citibank, ASEAN countries need US\$100 billion annually in the coming 10 to 15 years to develop infrastructure in particular transportation and power generation infrastructure (Supply Chain Asia, 2016).

For Southeast Asian states, the BRI complements their national development strategies, helping them to boost their connectivity-link economic development. For instance, Thailand wants to link its US\$44 billion Eastern Economic Corridor Development Plan (EEC)<sup>12</sup>, a plan to build infrastructure and to upgrade industry in its eastern seaboard with the BRI (Bloomberg, 22 June 2017). Cambodia, on the other hand, relies on Chinese investments and aid to implement its Rectangular Strategy<sup>13</sup> and Industrial Development Strategy 2015-2025<sup>14</sup>. To procure an

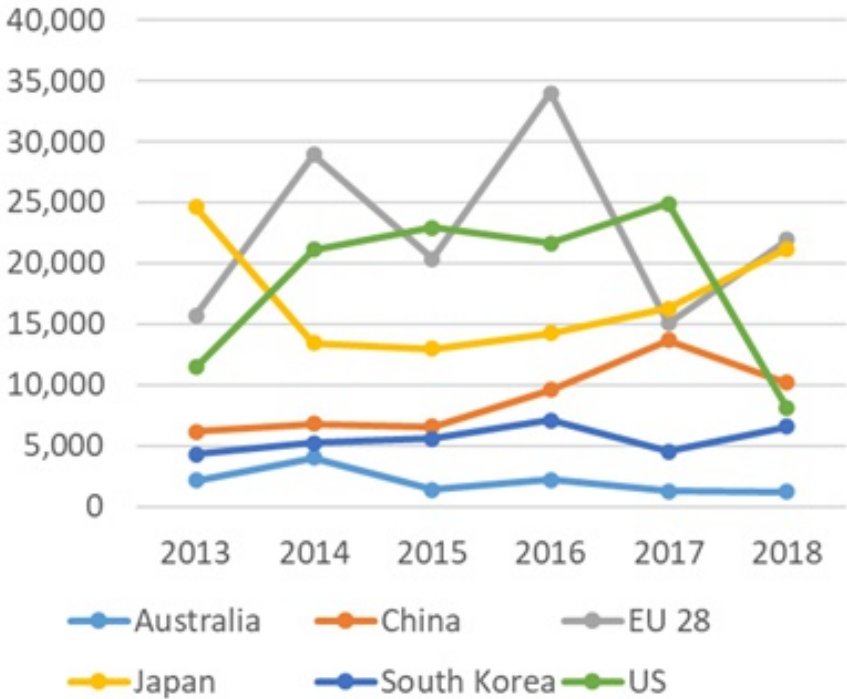


additional 35,000 megawatts (MW) of electricity by 2019<sup>15</sup>, Indonesia has welcomed Chinese construction and energy companies to invest in its energy sector. Malaysia has attracted Chinese investments to help attain developed nation status by 2020<sup>16</sup>. Under President Duterte, the Philippines has ambitious Build, Build, Build (BBB) infrastructure programme<sup>17</sup> to improve infrastructure in Metro Manila. The BRI offers huge opportunities for Southeast Asian countries to dock their respective national development plans and strategies with the BRI. At the regional level, it will help ASEAN to realise its Master Plan on Connectivity 2025<sup>18</sup> by boosting inter- and intra-regional connectivity. Many believe that the BRI will increase trade exchange and investment flow, bringing benefits to their economies and trade.

Current Southeast Asian leaders' trips to China are often accompanied by a delegation of businessmen. Besides official functions such as meetings and talks between leaders, the visiting leaders will also arrange tours as well as meetings and talks with Chinese business groups to encourage them to invest in their countries. In recent years, leaders would also conduct tours to prominent Chinese business premises such as Alibaba Group's headquarters in Hangzhou and Huawei in Shenzhen. The then Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, Indonesian President Joko Widodo, as well as Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand Somkid Jatusripitak, had discussed with Jack Ma, the founder of Alibaba Group regarding plans to cooperate on e-commerce during their visits to the headquarters of Alibaba Group in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province (*China Daily*, 10 January 2017).

Figure 1 illustrates foreign direct investment (FDI) flows into ASEAN from 2013 to 2018. With efforts by Southeast Asian leaders to attract China's investment, the inflow of Chinese investment into the region has been growing from about US\$6.2 billion in 2013 to about US\$10.2 billion in 2018 (*ASEANStatsDataPortal*, 2018d). A study by

**Figure 1** FDI Flows into ASEAN, 2013-2018 (in million US\$)



Source: *ASEANStatsDataPortal* (2018d).

the CIMB ASEAN Research Institute reports that BRI projects in ASEAN countries amount to more than US\$739 billion by 2018 (Cox *et al.*, 2018). Bilateral trade between ASEAN and China has also increased significantly, from US\$351.58 billion in 2013 to US\$483.76 billion in 2018 (*ASEANStatsDataPortal*, 2018e). ASEAN and China aim to reach US\$1 trillion in two-way trade and US\$150 billion in two-way investment by the end of 2020 (ASEAN, 2018).

However, Chinese investment slowed down in the second half of 2018, due to the trade war between China and the United States as well as the “debt trap” backlash of the BRI. Amid worries over high project costs and unsustainable debts, several BRI projects in Southeast Asia have either been cancelled or renegotiated. In August 2018, the Myanmar government decided to scale back the Kyaukpyu deepwater port project on the coast of its Bay of Bengal, from US\$9 billion to around US\$1.3 billion (Reuters, 2 August 2018). Meanwhile, in Malaysia, its new prime minister Mahathir Mohamad cancelled the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), the Multi-Product Pipeline and Trans-Sabah Gas Pipeline after concluding his first trip to China in August 2018 (*The Edge Markets*, 21 August 2018). The ECRL project was later revived in April 2019 after Malaysia and China renegotiated the construction cost from US\$16 billion (RM65.5 billion) to US\$10.7 (RM44 billion) (Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia, 2019). During his second trip to China to attend the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Mahathir pledged full support for the BRI, saying Malaysia will benefit from the initiative (*The Star*, 27 April 2019).

## ***6.2. Institutionalisation of Regional Multilateral Mechanism***

Mutual high-level visits between Chinese and Southeast Asian leaders have also intensified through a series of bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanism. At the bilateral level, China and most of the Southeast Asian states have upgraded relationships to comprehensive strategic partnerships since 2013. Collaboration and cooperation between the two sides have thus been widened. The high-level exchanges between China and individual Southeast Asian countries have gone beyond state visits and official visits. China has established joint committees at different levels with each Southeast Asian individual countries in the past four years.

On the multilateral level, Southeast Asian countries and China have formed a binding mechanism for their cooperation through various ASEAN Plus One mechanism including summit, ministerial and senior officials' meetings. They have also actively involved in other ASEAN-led frameworks such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Between 2014 and 2017, we also see China taking the initiative to host several international events like the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting (Summit), the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders' Meeting, and the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. These series of summits and meetings mark a new period of Chinese foreign political engagement with Southeast Asian countries. China has asserted itself not only an institutional follower but also a creator. These series of activities are effective in reinforcing the bond of mutual interest in various aspects. Indeed, leaders often make full use of these multilateral summits by conducting bilateral meetings with other attending leaders on the side-line of these multilateral summits.

Furthermore, the above multilateral meetings have enabled Chinese leaders to visit Southeast Asian countries. For example, Chinese President paid state visits to the Philippines and Brunei when he attended the 26th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Economic Leaders' Meeting in Papua New Guinea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018).

### ***6.3. Close Political Relations***

Among Southeast Asian countries, China has maintained a high frequency of diplomatic exchanges with Laos and Cambodia due to historical and political closeness. China and Laos are both socialist countries. Their relations are not limited to state-to-state relations, but

also extend to cooperation between the Chinese Communist Party and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. President Xi Jinping called Laos as "a good neighbour, friend, brother and partner" (*China Daily*, 1 December 2016). He had also chosen to pay a state visit to the country on 13th and 14th November 2017 after his re-election in October 2017 (*China Daily*, 9 November 2017). This fact reflects the great importance that China attaches to Laos. In 2017, China was the largest source of foreign investment to Laos, investing around US\$1.131 billion and accounting for 25.2 per cent of the total FDI of the country (*ASEANStatsDataPortal*, 2018c; *The Laotian Times*, 15 July 2019). Under the BRI, both sides have agreed to construct the US\$5.8 billion Laos-China railway linking Vientiane, the capital of Laos with China's border. The 417-km railway is scheduled to complete by the end of 2021 (*China Daily*, 11 November 2019).

Another close ally of China in the region is Cambodia. Like Laos, Cambodia may be relatively small if compared to other Southeast Asian countries. However, both Chinese President Hu and Xi had visited the country. While Western powers constantly criticise Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen over human rights oppression, China's adherence to the principle of non-interference has earned trust from him. Cambodia had twice stood up for China on the South China Sea issue during ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting to block any mention against China over the maritime dispute in the South China Sea in the joint statement by ASEAN<sup>19</sup>. Beijing appreciated Cambodia's support. When Chinese President Xi Jinping travelled to Cambodia on a state visit in 2016, he described Cambodia and China as "good neighbours, real friends who are loyal to each other" on a front-page commentary in Cambodia's biggest Khmer-language newspaper, *Rasmei Kampuchea* (Reuters, 13 October 2016). Consequently, China had rewarded Cambodia with increasing trade and investments.

Given Cambodia's closeness with China, Hun Sen has described the country's relationship with China as "siblings who share a single future." (*South China Morning Post*, 1 May 2019). When European Union sanctioned the country over the pre-election arrest of main opposition leader Kem Sokha and the dissolution of his National Rescue Party, Beijing reaffirmed its pledges by signing nine deals with Cambodia during the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (*South China Morning Post*, 1 May 2019). *ASEANStatsDataPortal* (2018b) shows that China invested about US\$798.24 million in Cambodia in 2018. It is also the biggest trade partner for Cambodia. Trade between Cambodia and China reached about US\$7 billion in 2018 (*ASEANStatsDataPortal*, 2018a). Since 2013, there have been several infrastructure projects launched under the BRI, namely the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone and the US\$1.87 billion Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway.

#### ***6.4. South China Sea Dispute***

While there are visits that aim to deepen collaborations under the BRI, there are also some visits meant for mending deteriorating relations caused by the overlapping claims over the South China Sea. The dispute has been a big challenge to China and four claimants in the region – Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Since 2013, China's relations with the Philippines and Vietnam have been marred by the escalating tensions over the South China Sea. The Philippines submitted the controversial case of the South China Sea to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in early 2013. The ruling announced in July 2016 favoured the Philippines in its case against China. The statistics show that no high-level visits between China and the Philippines between 2013 and mid of 2016. The Philippines's relations with China have changed after Duterte assumed office in June 2016. Duterte had extended goodwill to

rebuild bilateral ties. The two sides then began a process of rapprochement after that. Duterte's first state visit to China in October 2016 was a turning point for the improvement of Sino-Philippine relations (*The Guardian*, 18 October 2016). China-Philippine relations have been further improved by the visit of Duterte to China in May 2017 and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to the Philippines in November 2017.

On the other hand, there have been continuous tensions between China and Vietnam over the disputed waterway. Bilateral relations between China and Vietnam hit a low in 2014 when a Chinese state-owned company moved an oil rig into disputed waters near the Vietnamese coast in 2014. The move triggered a tense maritime standoff and anti-Chinese riots across Vietnam that killed at least 21 people (*Time*, 15 May 2014). In 2017, the tension between the two countries raised again by oil drilling by Vietnam<sup>20</sup> and China's military drills in the South China Sea<sup>21</sup>. The two countries only reached a consensus to maintain peace and stability in the disputed waterway during a state visit to Hanoi by Chinese President Xi Jinping (*South China Morning Post*, 13 November 2017).

For Southeast Asian countries that have overlapping claims with China in the South China Sea, mutual visits are crucial to enhance trust and to exchange views on the dispute to reduce misjudgement.

### ***6.5. Hedging Approach of Southeast Asian Countries***

While ASEAN countries have increased their frequency of visiting China, it does not mean that they have accepted China's increasing power in the region. Most Southeast Asian leaders do not place their eggs in one basket. In practice, most of the Southeast Asian countries continue to pursue a "hedging strategy" by strengthening ties with China's competitors in the region, including the United States, Japan and

India. Vietnam, one of the major claimants of the South China Sea, continues to engage the United States and Japan to resist Chinese expansion in the disputed waters. It has also courted support from India by elevating Vietnam-India bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Vietnam in 2016 (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2016). The two countries have then strengthened cooperation in security, defence and trade.

Other countries in the region have also responded positively to the then US President Obama's 2011 "Pivot to Asia", a policy that provides economic and military support to Asian countries to counterbalance the rising power of China. Four countries in the region - Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Brunei – joined the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in February 2016<sup>22</sup>. From 16th to 18th February 2016, all ten Southeast Asian leaders attended the ASEAN Leaders Summit at Sunnylands, California<sup>23</sup> (ASEAN, 2016a). However, they are more cautious in response to the Trump administration's promotion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy amidst an escalating US-China rivalry. Instead of embracing Trump's FOIP that is exclusive of China, ASEAN promotes the Indo-Pacific that is open to all countries by adopting the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" at the 34th ASEAN Summit in June 2019 (ASEAN, 2019a). Although Southeast Asian leaders are concerned about rising China's influence in the region, they do not want to distance themselves from China. In the eyes of Southeast Asian leaders, it is important to maintain the regional balance of power.

The ongoing railway projects in the region are good examples of Southeast Asian countries' hedging strategy against China. The Thai government had opened its mega-projects for both China and Japan. It awarded the 670km high-speed railway from Chiang Mai to Bangkok to Japan<sup>24</sup> while offered another high-speed railway from Bangkok to



Nakhon Ratchasima province to China<sup>25</sup>. As Japan and China compete for increasing influence in Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian leaders also practice smart diplomacy by playing one power against the other.

## **7. Conclusion**

While there is extensive literature on the BRI, the growing number of high-level visits has largely been ignored. This study aims to fill the gap by examining the impact of BRI on high-level visits between Chinese and Southeast Asian leaders. We argue that the BRI has encouraged more high-level exchanges between China and Southeast Asian countries. Statistics show that after the launch of BRI in 2013, Southeast Asian leaders' trips to China have almost doubled. These growing diplomatic exchanges have been supported by an economic impulse to seize the new opportunities offered by the BRI. Southeast Asian countries' proactive behaviour towards China has resulted in cooperation agreements and major deals related to the BRI projects. While China views the region as crucial to the implementation of the BRI, it does not reflect in the pattern of Chinese leadership travel to Southeast Asia. Instead of showing an increase in the number of visits, Chinese President Xi Jinping's and Premier Li Keqiang's trips to Southeast Asia do not show much difference as compared to the Hu and Wen period (2008-2012).

The high frequency of visits to China by Southeast Asian leaders is largely due to the BRI. However, the BRI is not the only reason that contributes to the high frequency of visits. The institutionalisation of bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanism between China and Southeast Asian countries has also increased the close bond between the two sides. Other reasons that affect the frequency of visits include cordial political relations between China and individual Southeast Asian

countries. As China has closer political ties with Cambodia and Laos, exchanges between their leaders were more as compared to other countries. Although the BRI has encouraged mutual visits between China and Southeast Asian countries, the South China Sea dispute remains a challenge to the relations between China and other claimants in the region. Vietnam and other claimants have adopted a “hedging strategy” to balance China’s growing assertiveness in the disputed waters. They also engage other major powers in the region to advance their economic growth.

Southeast Asian leaders’ passion for BRI projects has slowed down in the second term of the Xi-Li administration. Criticisms about corruption, debt trap, and environmental damage have made it a controversial trade and infrastructure scheme. In addressing all these criticisms, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged on financial sustainability, environmental protection and anti-corruption efforts in the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in April 2019 (*South China Morning Post*, 28 April 2019). In contrast to US trade protectionism, China’s pronounced vision of building a “community of shared future” as well as the openness and inclusiveness of the BRI will sustain China’s attractiveness in Southeast Asia.

High-level visit offers a useful way to examine the impacts of BRI on political and economic relations between China and Southeast Asian countries. However, it is an imperfect indicator for accessing the impacts of BRI on bilateral trade and foreign direct investment. In some cases, the narrow focus on high-level visits between Chinese and Southeast Asian leaders limits how a conclusion can make. Other factors could have been ignored in this analysis. Future research should seek to identify the impact of these high-level visits to bilateral trade and foreign direct investment between China and Southeast Asian countries.

## Notes

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1. Indonesian President Joko Widodo who sought for the re-election of presidency seat did not attend the summit as the date of the summit was close to the Indonesian Presidential Election 2019, which was scheduled on April 17, 2019. He sent Vice President Jusuf Kalla to represent Jakarta (*South China Morning Post*, 3 May 2019).
  2. China's dialogue relations with ASEAN started when the then Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen was invited by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to attend the 24th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) held in Kuala Lumpur in July 1991. In July 1996, China became ASEAN's full Dialogue Partner. See: ASEAN (2019b).
  3. On 14th March 2013, Xi Jinping was elected as Chinese President while Li Keqiang was elected as the Premier of the State Council at the 12th National People's Congress. On 17th March 2018, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang were elected to a second term at the annual session of the National People's Congress (NPC). Their second five-year term will be from 2018 till 2022.

4. They are Sultan and Prime Minister of Brunei Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah (1984-present), the King of Cambodia King Norodom Sihamoni (2004-present) and the Prime Minister of Cambodia Hun Sen (1985-present), President of Indonesia Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (October 2004-October 2014) and Joko Widodo (2014-present), President of Laos Choummaly Sayasone (March 2006-January 2016) and Bounnhang Vorachith (2016-present), Prime Minister of Laos Thongsing Thmmavong (December 2010-April 2016) and Thongloun Sisoulith (April 2016 – present), Yang Di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (December 2011-December 2016), Prime Minister of Malaysia Najib Razak (April 2009-May 2018) and Mahathir Mohamad (May 2018-present), President of Myanmar Thein Sein (March 2011-March 2016), Htin Kyaw (March 2016-March 2018), and Win Myint (March 2018-present), Prime Minister of Myanmar Thein Sein (October 2007-November 2011), State Counsellor of Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi (April 2016-present), President of the Philippines Benigno Aquino III (June 2010-June 2016) and Rodrigo Duterte (June 2016-present), President of Singapore Tony Tan Keng Yam (September 2011-August 2017) and Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong (August 2004-present), Prime Minister of Thailand Abhisit Vejjajiva (December 2008-August 2011) and Prayut Chan-o-cha (May 2014-present), President of Vietnam Truong Tan Sang (July 2011-April 2016) and Tran Dai Quang (April 2016-September 2018), Prime Minister of Vietnam Nguyen Tan Dung (June 2006-April 2016) and Nguyen Xuan Phuc (April 2016-present).
5. The king would travel to China twice a year for medical treatment. Usually the first trip will be in February or March; the second trip will be arranged six months later, which is in July or August. See: Xinhua (18 March 2019) and Xinhua (10 September 2018).

6. General Prayut Chan-o-cha, who is a coup maker in 2013 as well as the head of the National Council for Peace and Order, reclaimed the premiership after winning majority of votes from the House of Representatives and Senate (*Bangkok Post*, 6 Jun 2019).
7. Before the election, the Hun Sen administration has launched a series of crackdown on the oppositions to consolidate Hun Sen and his party leadership. In September 2017, Cambodian opposition leader Kem Sokha was charged with treason (Reuters, 5 September 2017a). In November 2017, Cambodia's Supreme Court ordered to dissolve the country's main opposition party Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) and banned its 118 senior officials from politics for five years (*The Phnom Penh Post*, 17 November 2017).
8. Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD) party won a parliamentary majority in the 2015 Myanmar general election. However, the former military rulers had passed a bill that requires the president to be someone who "himself, one of the parents, the spouse, one of the legitimate children or their spouses not owe allegiance to a foreign power". As Suu Kyi's two sons are British citizens, the bill has prevented her from becoming the President of Myanmar. To allow Suu Kyi to govern the country, the NLD has thus created a new role, State Counsellor. The bill was approved in both Houses on 7th April 2016. See: *ABC News* (5 April 2016).
9. Available online at <<http://www.fmprc.com>>.
10. There are altogether six economic corridors proposed by China: the China-Central Asia-Western Asia Corridor, the China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor, the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, the China-Myanmar-Bangladesh-India corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the New Eurasian Land Bridge.

11. Launched in February 2014, the RM40 billion Melaka Gateway project is a mixed development project that includes commercial, residential, entertainment and lifestyle elements. It will be built on three reclaimed islands and one natural island in the Strait of Malacca (*The Sun Daily*, 7 February 2014). Malaysian company KAJ Development Sdn Bhd (KAJD) will be responsible to develop the project with supports from China state-owned Powerchina International Group Ltd (*The Edge Markets*, 1 September 2016). Although the project is set to be Southeast Asia's largest private marina, it has experienced a few setbacks, including a delay from October 2018 to May 2019. In October 2018, Malaysian transport ministry revoked licence to operate the port and terminal hold by KAJD. After an appeal, the licences were reinstated in May 2019. However, there is question about the economic feasibility of the project (*Free Malaysia Today*, 11 October 2019).
12. The EEC project is part of Thai government's efforts to realize Thailand 4.0, an economic model that will transform the country into a technology and innovation-based country. The project has been designed to develop three eastern provinces – Chonburi, Rayong and Chachoengsao - into a hub of trade and investment with strong connectivity to its neighbours. The EEC area covers over 13,000 km<sup>2</sup>. It incorporates the upgrade of U-Tapao International Airport, the building of high-speed train, the expansion of the Laem Chabang and the Map Thaput deep seaports, and the expansion of highways and motorways. The project is expected to be completed by 2021.
13. The Rectangular Strategy launched by the Cambodian government in 2004 was a strategy to achieve four objectives: growth, employment, equity and efficiency. It is a supporting tool to achieve poverty reduction, development, prosperity and harmony. In 2013, it entered Phase III that emphasizes the "Socio-economic Policy Agenda". It will become a

comprehensive policy framework for the formulation of the “National Strategic Development Plan” (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2013).

14. Launched in 2015, the Industrial Development Policy is a guide to boost Cambodian industrial development through economic diversification, competitiveness enhancement and productivity promotion. It aims to transform the country’s industrial structure from a labour-intensive industry to a skill-driven industry by 2025. See: Royal Government of Cambodia (2015).
15. In 2014, Indonesian President Joko Widodo announced a plan to procure 35,000 megawatts (MW) of new electricity during his first term that will end in 2019. The plan worth Rp1,100 trillion is necessary for the country to realize its annual economic growth of 6-7 percent by 2019.
16. The aspiration for Malaysia to become a fully developed country by 2020 was set in *Wawasan 2020* or *Vision 2020* launched in 1991.
17. In 2016, the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte launched this US\$180 billion infrastructure programme to improve the country’s weak infrastructure. In the first stage, 75 flagship projects have been introduced, including six airports, nine railways, three bus rapid transits, 32 roads and bridges, and four seaports (*Forbes*, 28 February 2018). In November 2019, the list of flagship projects has been expanded to 100 (*ABS-CBN News*, 14 November 2019).
18. In 2016, ASEAN Leaders adopted the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (MPAC 2025). It focuses on five strategic areas, namely sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, seamless logistics, regulatory excellence and people mobility. See: ASEAN (2016b).
19. In 2012, Cambodia resisted to language used in the joint statement about the South China Sea. It also rejected the joint statement issued by ASEAN foreign ministers in September 2016 that referred to a ruling made by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague that denied China’s claims in the dispute. (Reuters, 25 July 2016).

20. In July 2017, Vietnam suspended an oil exploration project operated by Spain's Repsol in the South China Sea under the pressure from Beijing (*BBC News*, 21 July 2017).
21. In September 2017, Hanoi condemned Beijing's military live-fire exercises in the South China Sea that had violated its sovereignty (Reuters, 5 September 2017b).
22. After the US President Donald Trump withdrew from the TPP trade deal in January 2017, the remaining eleven countries decided to carry on the implementation of the TPP agreement. They renamed it as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in November 2017 (*The Strait Times*, 11 November 2017).
23. They were Sultan Hassan al Bolkiah of Brunei, Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia, President Joko Widodo of Indonesia, President Choummaly Sayasone of Laos, Prime Minister Najib Razak of Malaysia, President Benigno S. Aquino, 3rd of the Philippines, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha of Thailand, and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung of Vietnam.
24. Thailand and Japan reached an agreement to develop a 670km high-speed rail linking Bangkok and Chiang Mai in 2015 (*Bangkok Post*, 4 July 2015). After conducting a feasibility study in 2016, Japan has been reluctant to jointly invest in the project, fearing the 400 billion baht project will run at a loss. In September 2019, it was reported that the Thai government may cancel the project (*Bangkok Post*, 27 September 2019).
25. The project was announced during the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Summit on 22-24 March 2016. It was then delayed several times due to disagreements over design, financing and technical assistance (see: Reuters, 21 December 2017; *Bangkok Post*, 21 December 2019).



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***NSP and BRI:  
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