

China-ASEAN: From 'blue economy' to stable Indo-Pacific

Building stronger ASEAN-China relations in a new era, as stated by former Chinese ambassador to ASEAN Huang Xilian (*The Jakarta Post*, Nov. 2), is very timely. Economic cooperation between the two parties is significantly increasing and China is becoming a very strategic partner for ASEAN's economic growth in the last two decades.

The commitment of China's government to create a peaceful and stable region as shown in the 1992 Declaration on the South China Sea, the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties on the South China Sea, the 2017 framework of the Code of Conduct (COC) and the 2018 Single Draft South China Sea COC Negotiating Text is also praiseworthy.

However, it is undeniable that the overlapping claims on the South China Sea between China and ASEAN member states Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam justifies their common yet conflicting interests.

Although the signing of the actual COC between ASEAN and China should be one step ahead, the rise of China's economy and military modernization leads countries in the region to deepen mistrust, fueling further tension with each perceived stalling of the COC.

This is not to mention the strengthening relations between the United States with its quadrilateral partnership with Japan, Australia and India under its "free and open Indo-Pacific" platform. Although the US respects



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ASEAN's centrality and unity, through this mechanism, the US also welcomes India to be a leading global power on one hand and supports the strong leadership of Japan on the other.

A decade ago, scholar Geoffrey Till wrote in his book *Seapower: A Guide for the 21st Century* that as long as modern countries place more stress on their naval power to their national interest and territorial integrity instead of regional stability, the zero sum game and spirit of competition will remain.

Such a situation makes the Indo-Pacific region vulnerable. Without a joint regulatory mechanism on sea management, competition among countries in the Indo-Pacific will be more prominent than the cooperation that leaders say they wish to create.

Fortunately, despite their differences, almost all states believe that cooperation and joint arrangements are needed to overcome the tension and threats that occur at sea, coming from state and nonstate actors.

Thus, the collaborative and inclusive China-ASEAN Blue Economy Partnership agreed at the latest ASEAN-China Summit in early November in Bangkok is very relevant. At the main event, the 35th ASEAN Summit, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo also called for ASEAN member states to realize the Indo-Pacific Con-

nectivity within the framework of ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific and the sustainable use of the sea — following earlier international commitments to reducing harm on the oceans.

An expansion of the "green economy", the "blue economy" concept was introduced at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which emphasizes conservation and sustainable management, particularly in the oceans. The concept promotes the use of marine resources for economic growth, improvement of people's welfare and sustainable use of the sea.

Therefore, there are three main reasons why a collaborative and inclusive Blue Economy Partnership driven by ASEAN and China is vital in the Indo-Pacific. First, many developing countries are located in the region and depend on their seas. Second, the strategic role of Indian and Pacific Oceans in the region — particularly for sea lanes of communication and sea-based trade — accordingly needs joint sea management under the regional and international platform.

Third, there are many threats in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean regions posed by both state and nonstate actors because of its abundant natural resources, including fisheries as well as oil and gas reserves. This situa-

tion prompted some countries to transform their national maritime policies, often provoking a security dilemma and instability in the region. Here, the ASEAN-China Blue Economy partnership is a way to increase mutual trust among the states relating to maritime issues, which subsequently, should speed up the process of the COC signing.

Under China's Belt and Road Initiative scheme and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), also finalized at the Bangkok Summit, China is likely to be a strategic partner — not only for ASEAN member states but also for South Asian countries to promote marine ecosystem conservation and sustainable use of the ocean and marine resources, including cooperation in marine science and technology, ocean observation, hazard mitigation and ocean economy development.

Although India has recently decided to opt out of the RCEP due to its perceived unbalanced benefits for India, RCEP countries left the door open for India to return with negotiations regarding New Delhi's concerns. With India, the RCEP would have become the world's largest free trade area, comprising half of the world's population and accounting for nearly 40 percent of global commerce.

Such a partnership should not only increase national and regional economic growth with the sustainable use of the seas but also reduce tension in the Indo-Pacific, as well as create a peaceful, stable and prosperous region.