

# United Nations Economic and Social Council

Managing Chinese Political and Economic Influence in Southeast Asia



## Message from the Dais:

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Dear Delegates,

It is with great pleasure that we welcome you to ECOSOC at BEYMUN 2025. We are honored to serve as your chairs and look forward to an engaging and thought-provoking weekend of diplomacy, collaboration, and debate.

This committee presents a space for you to think critically, speak confidently, and listen actively. Whether this is your first conference or one of many, we encourage you to take full advantage of the opportunity to grow as delegates, negotiators, and global citizens. Your voices, ideas, and solutions are the driving force of this experience.

We strongly believe that Model UN is about more than competition—it is about learning from one another, approaching global issues with empathy and awareness, and challenging yourselves to consider perspectives beyond your own. Respectful debate, thorough research, and meaningful cooperation will all contribute to the success of our sessions.

We cannot wait to see what you bring to the table, and we are excited to watch this committee come to life.

Warmest regards,

Rayan Haidar —Chair

Tia Estepanian —Co Chair

Jiany Samara —Director

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## What is ECOSOC?

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Established in 1945 by the UN Charter, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is one of the six main organs of the UN. It is generally tasked with coordinating the work of the 15 UN specialized agencies, their functional commissions, and five regional commissions in the areas of economics, society, environment, and related fields. ECOSOC is an important platform for solving regional and global economic problems because it provides a platform for policy discussion, debate, and contemplation on sustainable development issues.

ECOSOC is key to the setting of the global development agenda because it is the UN's central organization for finding and championing solutions to global economic and social problems. It promotes policy

coherence and makes recommendations to member states, international financial institutions, and non-governmental institutions.

The mandate of ECOSOC involves a wide agenda of global problems such as eradication of poverty, economic growth, employment, trade, education, public health, and the protection of the environment. By way of its annual High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and other sessions, ECOSOC brings together government officials, civil society, and business representatives to advance international cooperation and development policy.

## **Relation to the Topic**

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In terms of economic policy, ECOSOC is actively engaged in advancing sustainable development, equitable economic cooperation, and national sovereignty protection. ECOSOC helps make sure that China's increasing trade and investment impact in Southeast Asia complies with international norms for economic justice, openness, and local empowerment. Additionally, it seeks to prevent economic alliances from causing environmental damage, debt reliance, or institutional deterioration.

## **Mapping to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):**

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- **SDG 8:** Decent Work and Economic Growth: This goal aims to guarantee inclusive and sustainable economic development while promoting decent work opportunities and economic growth. When Chinese-funded projects in Southeast Asia heavily rely on foreign labor, restrict domestic hiring, or omit protections for workers' rights, this is put to the test.
- **SDG 10:** Reduced Inequalities: Aims to mitigate global imbalances. Chinese economic involvement can widen inequality when the investment benefits only the elites or when the developing nations fall into debt traps, leading to increased dependency.
- **SDG 16:** Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions aims to promote accountability and good governance, relates with how Chinese influence can weaken democratic norms, politicize official actions, and make nefarious arrangements to undermine institutions in host nations.
- **Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17):** encourages just and long-lasting international collaborations. encourages Southeast Asian nations outside of China to form varied alliances to preserve their sovereignty and advance balanced multilateral development.

## Rules of Procedure

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This committee will operate on the basis of the regular BEYMUN rules of procedure. Delegates are required to use the following motions:

### **1. Setting the Agenda**

"The delegate of [Country X] motions to set the agenda in favor of Topic A/B." Yet, this motion will not be used in the conference since there is only 1 topic.

### **2. Speaker's List**

"The delegate of [Country X] motions to open the Speaker's List with a speaker's time of [Y] seconds."

### **3. Moderated Caucus**

"The delegate of [Country X] motions to suspend the debate and move into a moderated caucus to discuss '[Subtopic Y]' for a total time of [Z] minutes, with a speaker's time of [W] seconds."

### **4. Unmoderated Caucus**

"The delegate of [Country X] motions to suspend the debate and move into an unmoderated caucus to [form blocs and alliances / discuss resolutions / work on the working paper or draft resolution / discuss the crisis] for a total time of [Y] minutes."

### **5. Consultation of the Whole**

"The delegate of [Country X] motions to suspend the debate and move into a consultation of the whole to discuss [the recommendations elaborated in the previous unmoderated caucus / the crisis] for a total time of [Y] minutes."

### **6. Adjourn the Meeting**

The delegate of [Country X] motions to adjourn the meeting for [Y] minutes for the purpose of [a lunch break / a coffee break]."

### **7. Solicit a Third Party**

"The delegate of [Country X] motions to solicit [Third Party Y], as they possess relevant information or expertise regarding [Subtopic Z / the

crisis].”

## **8. Press Conference**

“The delegate of [Country X] motions to suspend the debate and move into a press conference to discuss [a resolution related to Y / the crisis] for a total time of [Z] minutes.”

## **9. Extend the Time of the Unmoderated Caucus**

“The delegate of [Country X] motions to extend the duration of the current unmoderated caucus by [Y] minutes.”

## **10. Introduce the Draft Resolution**

“The delegate of [Country X] motions to introduce the draft resolutions with a speaker’s time of [Y] seconds per author or co-sponsor.”

## **11. Close Debate and Move into Voting Procedure**

“The delegate of [Country X] motions to close the debate and move directly into voting procedure.”

(Note: This motion requires a two-thirds majority to pass.)

### **Written Motions:**

1. Right of Reply: Delegates can request the right of reply to another delegate who has offended their country. There is no right of reply to a right of reply.
2. Appeal to the Chair's Decision: If the delegates feel that the chair has made an unfair decision, the delegates can send it as a note to the Chair.

### **Points:**

- Point of Order: Used to correct a procedural or factual mistake. Interruptive, but do not overuse it.
- Point of Personal Privilege: Request to leave or adjust comfort (e. g. , temperature). Interruptive.
- Point of Inquiry: Ask about the rules or current stage. Interruptive.
- Point of Information: Ask a question when the floor is open. Not interruptive.

- Point to Instigate a Debate: Challenge another delegate's resolution stance. Interruptive and subject to chair's approval.

## Introduction to the Topic

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As one of the world's most populous nations and largest economies, China has emerged as a central force in global affairs. Its rapid economic rise and growing geopolitical ambition have positioned it as a key influencer in international development, particularly in Southeast Asia. The past two decades have experienced a revolutionary change in the economic and geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia, fueled in part by the growing might of the region's dominant external powers. Among these, China has been a particularly active player, extending its influence across the region utilizing trade, investment, diplomacy, the construction of infrastructure, and strategic cooperation. These interactions not only remapped bilateral relations but also raised immediate questions regarding sovereignty, sustainability, and regional stability.

One of the pillars of that influence has been China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 to facilitate connectivity and cooperation on a transcontinental scale. Across Southeast Asia, the



initiative has manifested as ambitious infrastructure projects meant to trigger growth and facilitate trade. From the Laos-China Railway to Indonesia's Jakarta-Bandung line and Malaysia's East Coast Rail Link, all these ventures are part of a broader pattern of regional integration fueled by foreign capital and expertise.

But foreign investment has become the source of growing unease. Issues varying from debt sustainability to opacity, environmental degradation, and marginalization of locals have emerged as issues linked to some of these initiatives. Development, in most cases, has occurred with insufficient consultation and protection, leading to displacement, social tensions, and environmental destruction. Economic dependence on single creditors, by contrast, may heighten political coercion susceptibility, creating apprehension over decreased autonomy in foreign and domestic policy decision-making.

The effect also transcends economics and infrastructure. In fields like digital governance, surveillance, and diplomatic alignment, new forms of engagement have emerged, posing questions about data protection, human rights, and democratic legitimacy. The region is therefore faced with a complex juggling act: harnessing the benefits of foreign finance and development while preserving national agendas and institutional strength.

The situation having extended in scale, its implication now reaches countries even outside of Asia, with the likes of the United States, European Union and Australia offering alternatives to Chinese investments, promising a more transparent approach that would cast away any risks of political interference.

In the evolving environment, Southeast Asian countries, regional organizations, and international players are all searching for what is best to do when facing the multi-faceted effects of China's political and economic influence. It is not just a matter of handling infrastructure deals or trade pacts but crafting a strategic vision for sustainable, inclusive, and independent growth in a highly competitive global age.

In light of these complexities, several critical questions emerge. How can Southeast Asian nations ensure that foreign investments promote

national development goals while preserving autonomy? What role should the international community play in encouraging openness, justice, and sustainability in foreign-funded projects? How can these nations strategically engage with China while diversifying partnerships to maintain geopolitical and economic balance? These are not merely rhetorical inquiries—they frame the core of policy-making debates shaping the region's future.

## Topic in Depth

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China's political and economic influence in Southeast Asia is expanding and encompasses trade, diplomacy, infrastructure development, military connections, and digital growth. Examining several connected areas is necessary to comprehend the nuances of this influence:



## The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

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Initiated in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative is one of the most important elements of China's growing economic and political influence in Southeast Asia. Acting as a worldwide infrastructure and investment strategy, it is a key element in China's pursuit of regional dominance, seeking to increase connectivity and economic cooperation. Southeast Asia is an important participant in this initiative because of its advantageous location and profitable possibilities. In countries like Laos, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Myanmar, China has made large investments in developing ports, roads, railroads, and industrial zones. Notable projects include the East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail in Indonesia, the Kyaukphyu Deep-Sea Port in Myanmar, and the Laos-China Railway, which connects Vientiane with southern China.

Pledging to enhance infrastructure, significantly increase and facilitate commerce, enable access to international markets, and start a surge in new employment opportunities, these initiatives bring up important issues. These include economic issues such as debt accumulation, governance issues related to a lack of transparency, environmental issues involving ecological degradation, and social issues such as displacement and reduced local employment. Chinese loans finance numerous BRI-funded initiatives, often with ambiguous conditions and little control, adding to the high levels of national debt. This has raised concerns about "debt-trap diplomacy," in which nations that are unable to pay back debt would be forced to make strategic or political compromises. Moreover, certain BRI projects have come under fire for their lack of transparency, harm to the environment, community displacement, and use of Chinese labor instead of domestic workers.

Significant economic reliance on China might result in more political influence and less policy autonomy, which has important geopolitical ramifications. This raises sovereignty issues and foreign policy vulnerability for recipient nations. While some nations overlook these risks given the potential benefits associated with the projects, others in the region have taken action and either renegotiated or slowed down their commitments. In the end, China's involvement in the area is reflected in the BRI, which presents both possibilities and concerns.



While it can promote modernization and progress, it also poses challenges to governance, sovereignty, and sustainable development.

## **Debt Diplomacy and Sovereignty Concerns**

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The idea of "debt-trap diplomacy," which refers to circumstances in which developing countries accrue unmanageable debt to Chinese lenders, frequently for significant infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a primary cause of concern regarding China's influence in Southeast Asia. Even while these loans are marketed as development instruments, they are usually arranged with little to no transparency, have stipulations that disproportionately favor Chinese businesses, or involve Chinese labor. Chinese creditors have dominated the foreign debt levels of nations like Laos and Cambodia, which has raised concerns about their long-term capacity to pay back and maintain control over their national assets.

This reflects financial issues (debt dependency), sovereignty concerns (loss of control over national infrastructure), and governance issues (non-transparent loan terms). China has occasionally acquired

influence over vital national infrastructure in situations where repayment is not practical. Despite not being in Southeast Asia, the case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port is frequently used as a warning example since the government was unable to pay back Chinese loans and gave the port to a Chinese business on a 99-year lease. In Southeast Asia, where comparable hazards exist, such consequences give rise to issues over sovereignty. For instance, the Laos-China Railway was constructed by Chinese contractors and financed mostly by Chinese financing, raising concerns about Laos's long-term management and financial success.

Beyond the economic implications, growing debt dependence may also lead to political influence, where debtor nations feel compelled to align their foreign policy decisions with China's strategic interests, such as those involving territorial disputes in the South China Sea or positions within international institutions. This highlights geopolitical and diplomatic issues tied to external influence and diminished policy independence. The region has also witnessed the entrance of international organizations such as the World Bank and others, all backed by the Western nations, attempting to compete against the Chinese influence machine, deploying billions upon billions in the hope of reaching the same league as them in terms of resources. As a result, amid all this chaos, Southeast Asian countries find themselves obligated to navigate a delicate balance between accepting essential foreign investment and protecting their national sovereignty, economic autonomy, and political independence.

## **Political Alignment and Diplomatic Influence**

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Along with its economic investments, China gradually increased its political influence in Southeast Asia's diplomatic landscape. China has established solid ties with many nations by providing financial support and launching new infrastructure projects. This financial assistance is frequently viewed as a means of promoting political conformity with Beijing's objectives. As a result, there are mounting concerns that countries in the region may feel compelled—either overtly or through

indirect pressure—to endorse China’s foreign policy positions or to remain silent on sensitive issues like the South China Sea disputes, human rights violations, and the question of Taiwan’s sovereignty.



Countries heavily reliant on Chinese investment may find it difficult to challenge or oppose Beijing’s actions, fearing economic retaliation or the withdrawal of funding. For instance, some ASEAN members have hesitated to take a stance on maritime sovereignty or freedom of navigation and instead adopted a more China-friendly approach to the subject. This dynamic undermines regional cohesion, weakens multilateral decision-making within ASEAN, and limits the ability of smaller states to independently formulate foreign policy.

To further establish its influence within Southeast Asian institutions, China's diplomatic methods also include soft power techniques like media cooperation, cultural exchanges, and political training initiatives. Although the goal of these initiatives is to promote understanding amongst people, they run the risk of promoting China's narratives at the price of pluralism, democracy, and openness. As a result, neighboring countries have found themselves preoccupied with balancing their strategic alliances with China against their diplomatic autonomy and multilateralism.



# Digital Infrastructure and Surveillance Technology

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Increasing China's involvement in building digital infrastructure throughout Southeast Asia presents fresh connectivity opportunities as well as major, layered complexities about surveillance, privacy, and cybersecurity. This involves technological issues (data sovereignty and infrastructure control), ethical concerns (privacy and civil liberties), and governance issues (lack of transparency and regulatory oversight). China has been a major contributor to the building of telecommunications networks, cloud computing platforms, and smart city infrastructure in Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines through Huawei, ZTE, and other companies. These technologies could expand internet coverage and enhance digital infrastructure, but compromise data security and government monitoring. Particularly if combined with covert contracts and weak regulatory agencies, critics worry that using Chinese technology would permit vast surveillance, opposition muffling, and government domination over information.

Though they also bring significant benefits, such as improved public service delivery, digital inclusion, and greater access to the internet, they have raised major concerns of privacy, digital sovereignty, and the possibility of surveillance-driven totalitarianism. Chinese support has

led to a variety of systems, including surveillance technology such as facial recognition cameras, AI-based monitoring tools, and data collecting devices; they are often marketed under the "Smart Cities" label. Countries like Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar have welcomed these technologies with minimal public debate and legal protection, therefore fostering a culture that could evolve to be the standard for pervasive surveillance.

However, along with being a helpful tool, this also introduces cybersecurity risks, democratic erosion, and human rights issues due to excessive state control over digital spaces. Critics contend that Chinese authorities might exploit or gain unlawful access to sensitive national information from Southeast Asian countries, hence endangering them. These systems raise worries of digital dependency, whereby foreign-controlled systems rely on state databases and important communication networks. This reliance puts countries at risk of being exploited, hacked, or otherwise attacked in numerous ways.

China's growing digital footprint across Southeast Asia raises major issues of accountability and transparency. Regarding data security dangers and democratic backslide, the lack of openness in procurement processes, the absence of third-party auditors, and unclear terms of service concerning Chinese digital infrastructure have raised issues. These governance issues are compounded by concerns over ethical AI use and suppression of dissent.

These issues have also manifested in the AI race between China and the US, with China's DeepSeek model entering the market in recent months and achieving staggering numbers, posing a direct threat as an alternative to Open AI's Chat GPT. Multiple US legislators have called for the unilateral ban of this platform due to its affiliation with the Chinese government, citing precedents such as Huawei and ZTE. This came only weeks after the US TikTok ban should have come in place if it was not to a last-minute agreement brokered with the new Trump Administration.

Efforts to use digital technologies to censor dissidents, monitor political rivals, and regulate public debate have been attributed to China in the

past. Furthermore, increasing Chinese influence over the development of digital policy norms via its technologies and values might drive Southeast Asian nations away from open, democratic, and rights-oriented regulation and toward state-oriented approaches to internet management. This shift introduces normative issues that challenge democratic values and human rights standards in digital governance. Long term, such a drift would undermine civil liberties, freedom of expression, and digital rights throughout the region, therefore threatening openness and responsibility in worldwide tech governance norms. Southeast Asian governments confront a major difficulty in this changing environment: how to gain from the advantages of cheap and sophisticated digital infrastructure while safeguarding national data sovereignty, civil liberties, and long-term technological independence.

## **Environmental and Social Impacts**

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Under foreign investment and strategic motives, transnational infrastructural development has accelerated an intricate matrix of environmental deterioration and socio-anthropological dislocation throughout the region. Often framed in the language of modernization and economic ascendancy, these projects may avoid strict environmental review and reject participatory consultative processes, hence prioritizing ecological stewardship and community agency over geoeconomic calculus.





From an ecological standpoint, the effects are serious and multiple. The invasion of megaprojects into ecologically sensitive or biodiverse areas has caused systematic disturbances, hydrological recalibrations, deforestation of primary forests, wetland obliteration, and ecological fragmentation, thereby reducing ecosystem services and causing irreparable loss of biocultural legacy. Such degradation has cascading consequences that endanger not only regional environmental resiliency but also the intergenerational viability of natural capital.

On the sociopolitical scale, the removal of underprivileged populations is usually carried out employing unclear procedures lacking fair restitution, causing a systematic disenfranchisement and, therefore, damaging social glue and causing cultural collapse. The influx of foreign labor and the preferential subcontracting to external entities exacerbate labor market distortions, suppress domestic employment opportunities, and entrench socio-economic asymmetries. The technocratic opacity that defines so many of these bilateral

agreements worsens this dynamic since it practically shields decision-makers from public responsibility and democratic supervision.

## **Regional Responses and the Role of Multilateralism:**

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Southeast Asian countries have increasingly seen the importance of multilateralism — the practice of working collectively with multiple countries and organizations to address common challenges — to uphold their sovereignty, safeguard national stability, and foster sustainable development in the face of growing geopolitical complexity and asymmetrical economic dependencies driven by external powers. Inherent to a commitment to consensus and non-interference, ASEAN has developed as a valuable but circumscribed forum for providing collective perspectives on external stimuli and setting normative norms to guide such influences.

Through rule-of-law, transparent and inclusive infrastructure, and trade policies in the guise of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, members have sought to reclaim their strategic agency. Internal fissures, disparate economic conditions, and divergent perceptions of threats still hinder the bloc from presenting a collective strategic front against assertive foreign powers.

More substantial multilateral institutions such as the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the World Bank act as key counterbalancing mechanisms for development finance with an emphasis on accountability, environmental protection, and inclusive policy-making. The organizations offer key normative norms and alternative sources of finance, hence reducing the monopoly power of a single creditor state.

While domestic reaction might still be multifarious and even spasmodic, the move towards multilateralism versus bilateralism reflects increasing awareness of the need for cooperative and moral action in confronting threats from outside influence. Securing foreign alliances that support rather than erode the region's long-term independence, stability, and prosperity will depend on improving



institutional capacity, concerted regulation, and the positive involvement of civil society.

## **China's Influence on Regional Maritime Security and Sovereignty**

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One of the most controversial aspects of China's growing influence in Southeast Asia is its proactive strategy regarding the control of the South China Sea. China claims sovereignty over the majority of this waterway, which is abundant in resources and essential to multiple shipping routes in the area. This has created friction with numerous Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Beijing has implemented a policy of militarization, conducted the construction of artificial islands and set up military installations in disputed regions, further intensifying the tensions in the area.

Although ASEAN tried to respond with consideration regarding these challenges, internal conflicts prevailed, with certain member countries still hesitant to confront China due to their economic affiliations. China's approach involves deploying naval assets to widen its authority, conducting military exercises, and applying diplomatic pressure on nations questioning its claims. South East Asian countries now find

themselves in a tricky situation, trying to balance protecting maritime rights with benefits that come from their economic relations with China. While some nations have sought assistance from external players, like the United States, others have been more cautious, staying neutral and aiming to avoid any retaliations from the Chinese government.

The region's prosperity has seen itself become entangled in this conflict, as the South China Sea dispute continues to influence international interactions in the Indo-Pacific region. Consequently, China's maritime strategy not only intensifies territorial disputes but also impacts ASEAN's unity and its capacity to present a solid front in response to external pressures.

## **China's Expanding Role in Southeast Asia's Technology Landscape**

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As Southeast Asia quickly embraces new technologies to boost its economic growth, China has strategically established itself as a significant player within the region's technological landscape. Chinese tech firms, ranging from telecommunications, e-commerce and fintech, have all made considerable progress in Southeast Asia through a multitude of collaborations and investments. Companies such as Huawei, Alibaba, and Tencent have established themselves as indispensable players in the day-to-day life of millions of Asians by delivering essential digital infrastructure and services. While these technological advancements have stimulated innovation and improved the lives of billions, concerns have surfaced regarding data safety due to the potential growth of Chinese influence over the region's tech infrastructure.

China's position as a technological leader in Southeast Asia extends beyond infrastructure. It created dependencies through initiatives like the Digital Silk Road, which seeks to enhance China's sway in the global digital economy by promoting digital trade and investment in developing nations. As Southeast Asian countries increasingly rely on Chinese technology for everything from 5G networks to online financial



services, they face the challenge of balancing the advantages of advanced technology with the risks of becoming ensnared in China's technological sphere. This situation prompts questions about the susceptibility of local industries to Chinese market domination and the implications for national security if vital technological systems come under Chinese influence. Thus, as the digitalization of Southeast Asia continues, measures should be put in place to navigate the opportunities for economic growth while protecting technological independence and avoiding the formation of any monopoly in the sector.

## **China's Influence on Southeast Asia's Agricultural and Environmental Sectors**

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As China extends its influence across Southeast Asia, its impact now reaches the agricultural and environmental sectors of the region. Many brand new farming facilities have seen the light of day as a result of massive Chinese investments, primarily in nations rich in natural resources like Myanmar and Laos. These investments aim to secure China's food and resource sustainability by directly controlling the supply chains while also fostering economic growth in the host countries. However, these projects have aroused concerns regarding whether or not they were sustainable in the long term. The rapid growth of industrial agriculture is contributing to mass deforestation and the degradation of soil and natural sources of water. These issues threaten not only the countries' natural landscapes but also the livelihoods of local communities dependent on these natural infrastructures.



Furthermore, the rising demand for agricultural goods to satisfy China's increasing consumption, particularly in areas like palm oil, rubber, and timber, has resulted in land seizures and the displacement of indigenous populations. These activities have worsened social inequalities, as local communities often endure the negative consequences of economic growth without reaping its full benefits. Additionally, China's involvement in the extraction of the region's natural resources has emphasized the necessity for enhanced environmental protection policies and governance frameworks to ensure that economic development does not compromise ecological integrity. As climate change intensifies, Southeast Asia confronts the dual challenge of managing its natural resources responsibly while accommodating the growing influence of external entities like China, whose policies and investments are reshaping the region's environmental and agricultural landscape. This highlights the need for regional collaboration on sustainable development practices that prioritize both economic and environmental resilience.

## **China's Role during COVID-19**

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China emerged as a key actor in the COVID-19 pandemic, which signaled a sea change in Southeast Asia's international relations. China stepped in to supply vital medical supplies, such as vaccines, PPE, ventilators, and medications, as global supply chains broke down and Western countries turned inward. Its reputation as a trustworthy and accommodating partner was enhanced by this prompt assistance, especially among ASEAN nations dealing with serious health emergencies.

This aid surge did, however, also draw attention to an increasing strategic reliance. Despite continuous discussions about efficacy and data transparency, many Southeast Asian governments sided more with Beijing as Chinese vaccines, such as Sinovac and Sinopharm, became available more quickly than those made by COVAX or Western producers. What started as crisis cooperation turned into a more extensive dependence on Chinese biotechnology and healthcare infrastructure.

The pandemic revealed flaws in ASEAN's healthcare systems, igniting discussions about improved regional readiness and health independence. Despite its short-term benefits, Chinese aid sparked discussions about diversifying supply chains and funding domestic pharmaceutical manufacturing. To counterbalance China's influence, several ASEAN nations began investigating vaccine production in partnership with Indian or Western businesses.

To put it briefly, China's actions during the pandemic enhanced its position in vital fields such as biotechnology, public health, and crisis management. Yet, this heightened presence sparked conversations about striking a balance between short-term demands and long-term autonomy, raising concerns about whether these pandemic collaborations would result in continued dependence or encourage Southeast Asia to become more resilient as a region.

## **Global Implications and the Role of Non-ASEAN Actors**

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Global powers like the United States, Japan, India, the European Union, and Australia are influenced by China's increasing presence in Southeast Asia with far-reaching effects. These states are actively involved in shaping or balancing China's influence in the region by furthering diplomatic relations, increasing aid, and offering infrastructure investment choices competitive with Beijing's. They have modified their external policies to provide strategic and economic choices, commonly advocating rules-based engagement, sustainability, and transparency. The EU's Global Gateway, Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, and India's "Act East" policy are just a few among many initiatives that aim to counterbalance China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and keep power in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States, meanwhile, has also sought to offer an alternative democratic and transparent model of development in contrast to China's state-driven approach via its Indo-Pacific Strategy as well as the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative.



In a broader sense, China's rise to prominence as a global lender has altered the financial order. China's lending practices are now on par with those of well-known multilateral financial institutions, as more than 140 countries have joined BRI initiatives and Chinese banks have disbursed hundreds of billions in loans. South Asia is indirectly affected



as countries weigh the economic appeal of quick infrastructure funding against the possibility of long-term political dependencies.

In Southeast Asia, responses to Chinese influence are extremely diverse and shaped by each nation's strategic interests, economic needs, and political circumstances. Vietnam has pursued a wary and often combative policy, especially in the South China Sea, where it has strongly opposed Chinese claims and militarization. Despite economic ties with China, Hanoi remains determined to diversify its strategic alliances, strengthening defense cooperation with the United States, Japan, and India to counterbalance Beijing's assertiveness.

Cambodia, on the other hand, has emerged as one of China's closest friends in the region. Phnom Penh has been showered with billions of Chinese aid and investment, largely in the form of BRI projects such as highways, hydropower dams, and economic zones. Consequently, Cambodia has consistently stood up for China's interests in ASEAN forums, including blocking joint statements against Beijing's actions in the South China Sea. This alignment has raised concerns of growing political dependence and eroded regional consensus.

The Philippines is a complex case, with its foreign policy swinging between alignment and opposition depending on the administration. Under the previous Duterte administration, the country downplayed maritime disputes and rolled out the welcome mat for Chinese investment, though most of the promised infrastructure deals did not happen. The current leadership under President Marcos Jr. has asserted sovereignty in the South China Sea, invited American military support, and adopted a more balanced approach—maintaining economic relations with China while resisting its territorial encroachment.

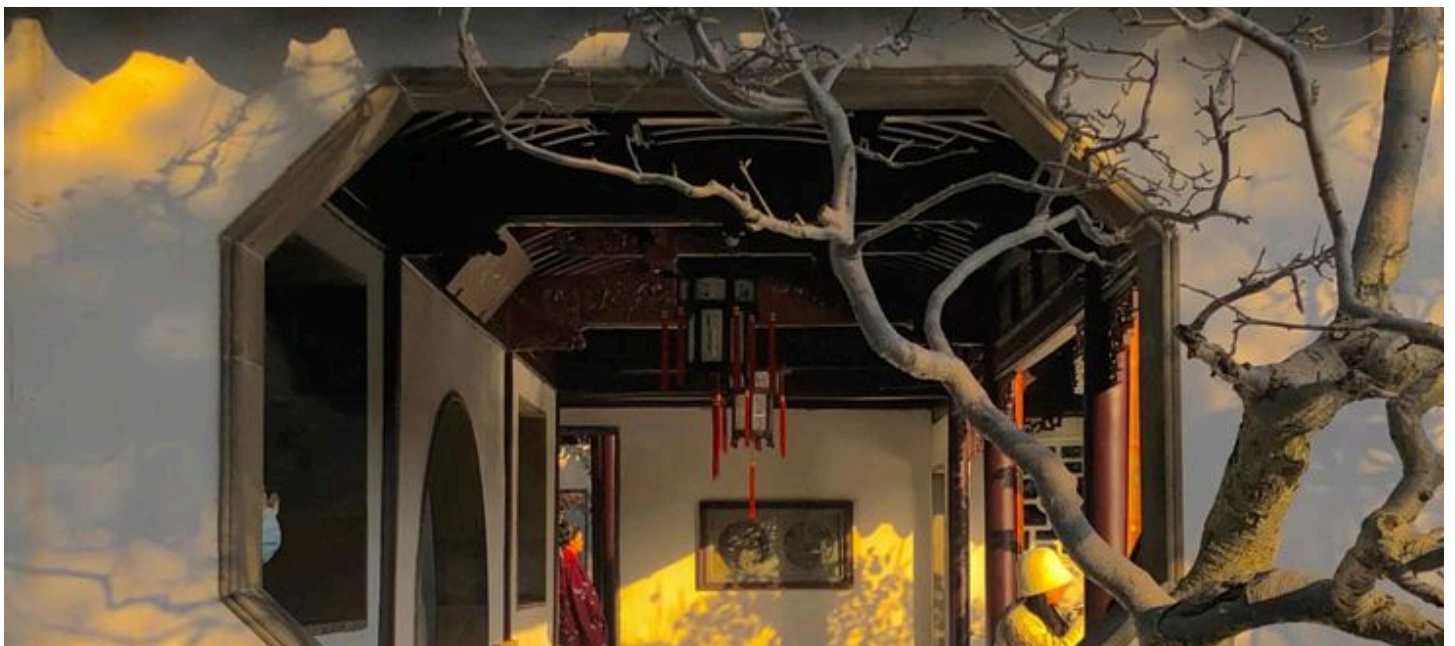
Indonesia and Malaysia take a more pragmatic approach, gradually pushing economic cooperation while advancing national interests. Jakarta has welcomed Chinese investment, including major BRI-related projects like the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail, but remains wary of security concerns, especially regarding Natuna waters. Malaysia, while benefiting from infrastructure financing, has occasionally renegotiated or scaled back projects so that they remain consistent with national

development goals and do not increase debt vulnerability. Both nations emphasize maintaining ASEAN centrality and strategic autonomy in regional affairs.

## **Global Implications of China's Economic Diplomacy**

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China's growing economic power is having a major impact globally, particularly in Southeast Asia and beyond. Being the second-largest economy in the world, China's approach to investment and trade is influencing how countries like India, Japan, the United States, and European Union members shape their strategies in South Asia and other regions. China's strength in infrastructure financing, technology exports, and industrial supply chains is making many countries reevaluate their foreign and economic policies. While these countries can benefit from Chinese investment, there is also concern about becoming overly reliant on China.



China's significant influence as a global lender plays a key role. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), China offers substantial and rapid funding for infrastructure projects, especially in areas lacking support from traditional financiers. However, this new form of development finance isn't without issues. Some say it lacks transparency and can put nations at risk of accumulating unsustainable debt. Countries across

Africa, Latin America, and parts of Eastern Europe have seen the immediate advantages of engaging with Chinese loans, but they've also had to face long-term financial pressures. In South Asia, places like Sri Lanka and Pakistan serve as examples of how excessive exposure to Chinese debt can reduce policy choices and lead to concessions of sovereign assets.

These financial dynamics are shifting the global financial landscape, challenging the control of Western institutions like the IMF and World Bank. This means countries and regions now navigate a more complex financial world. Although Chinese funds may come with fewer political strings attached, they may involve larger strategic concerns. For many countries in South and Southeast Asia, the challenge is finding a way to utilize Chinese investments for development while avoiding the pitfalls of economic dependency and potential geopolitical compromise.

## **International actions**

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The international community has approached the issue of Chinese political and economic dominance in Southeast Asia from multiple angles.. Individual governments, regional alliances, and multilateral organizations have all taken action, either to work with China, provide alternate development avenues, or advocate for more open and equal investment standards.



### **A) ASEAN Responses and Regional Frameworks:**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has adopted a wary and fragmented approach to Chinese influence. Internal divisions have been a limiting factor for the regional integration and cooperation that ASEAN is pushing for in its Chinese activities. These divisions have been especially prevalent on sensitive topics such as BRI investments and the South China Sea disputes.

Nonetheless, ASEAN has pushed for several initiatives and improvements regarding regional infrastructure and sustainability, such as:

The Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 seeks to enhance coordination with external partners and promote sustainable infrastructure.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) introduced in 2019, emphasizes inclusivity, transparency, and cooperation in the region.

### **B) The United Nations and ECOSOC's Role:**



The UN has promoted development models such as sustainability, inclusiveness, and transparency through ECOSOC and its specialized agencies. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) have helped assess the long-term impacts of foreign investments and support capacity-building programs for Southeast Asian governments.

Highlighted through ECOSOC's sessions and forums:

- The importance of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) when aligned with the SDGs.
- The need is to reduce reliance on diversified development partnerships and strengthen institutional resilience.
- The use of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to evaluate how countries are applying sustainability and transparency in infrastructure deals.

### **C) G7 and Global Gateway Initiative:**

The Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, later rebranded as Global Gateway by the European Union, was launched by the G7 in 2021 in response to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Focusing on transparency, sustainability, and democratic values, the initiative aims to mobilize hundreds of billions of dollars to be invested in infrastructure across developing and emerging economies. Unlike the BRI, which has often been criticized for unclear loan terms and potential debt traps, the Global Gateway is based on rule-based engagements, environmental safeguards, and social inclusivity.

The main areas of focus include digitalization, renewable energy, healthcare systems, education, and transportation infrastructure, prioritizing local ownership and the betterment of governance frameworks. This initiative also strives to maintain high standards in labor practices, environmental safeguards, and financial transparency. Thus, it implicitly contrasts with the more state-driven and profit-based model of the BRI. In Southeast Asia, the Global Gateway aims to strengthen partnerships by accommodating climate-resilient infrastructure, aligning regulations, and encouraging private sector involvement. With this

strategy, the G7 and EU not only intend to broaden regional development choices but also to reaffirm Western influence in an area where strategic rivalries are intensifying. If executed effectively, the initiative could act as a credible alternative to projects funded by China and serve as a means of upholding global principles regarding ethical development and geopolitical equilibrium, putting a stop to a potential Chinese monopoly in the sector.

#### **D) The Quad and Indo-Pacific Strategies:**

In light of the ever-changing geopolitical dynamics in the region, especially with the increase in strategic and economic influence of China, various global players have set up alternative frameworks and alliances to maintain regional stability, ensure maritime security, and protect the established international order. At the forefront of these efforts is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a strategic partnership involving the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Created in the 2000s, the Quad has transformed from primarily a security-focused entity to one that includes a wider array of areas, including infrastructure projects, vaccine distribution efforts, innovation in new technologies, and strengthening in cybersecurity. The coalition is a values-driven alliance dedicated to promoting transparency, sustainable growth, and adherence to international law, especially concerning maritime rights and sovereignty in the South China Sea. Simultaneously, several member nations have discussed their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. For example, Japan's vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) and the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy explicitly promote alternative infrastructure financing models to initiatives like the Belt and Road. These initiatives prioritize reliable infrastructure, responsible governance, fiscal prudence, and the empowerment of local populations, thereby serving as corrective examples to opaque or coercive financing methods.

Furthermore, these strategies highlight the significance of ASEAN centrality, recognizing the regional bloc as crucial for Indo-Pacific

stability and as a key player in shaping the basis for new international relations in the area. They seek to support rather than disregard regional institutions, thus empowering multilateral legitimacy and strategic inclusiveness.

By creating multinational economic, technological, and security partnerships, these strategies represent a unified effort to offer Southeast Asian countries varied options, lessening structural reliance on any single foreign entity. However, the success of such frameworks relies on their capacity to provide substantial benefits locally and to maintain diplomatic coherence by avoiding divisions among regional actors caught amid newly born rivalries.

## **Global Civil Society and Watchdog Organizations**

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Global civil society and international monitoring organizations play a crucial role in deciphering the intentions behind newly funded projects realized by foreign entities, especially in areas prone to deceptive governance. Organizations such as Transparency International, Global Witness, and Human Rights Watch provide oversight by investigating corruption, taking note of human rights violations, and recording environmental harm linked to major infrastructure projects. Thus, they serve not only as champions of accountability but also as advocates for marginalized groups who are frequently left out of policy discussions, giving a voice to displaced communities, workers, and indigenous peoples. These organizations strengthen locals' capacity to resist exploitative practices and demand for inclusive governance by forming alliances with investigative journalists and academic institutions. Furthermore, their impact goes beyond immediate actions; through global campaigns, policy suggestions, and the establishment of norms, they contribute to shaping new ethical standards, environmental awareness, and digital independence, ensuring that international development aligns with the UN SDGs.



## Recommendations

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Delegates are encouraged to keep up with current developments in the global economy, in particular those related to Chinese economic policies and the ongoing US-China tariff tensions, as these changes can significantly affect the Southeast Asian region.

Delegates should be well-researched on their delegations' inner ties with the Chinese government and any of their ongoing programs to stay true to their real political affiliations.

Delegates are encouraged to plan initiatives and come up with new clever solutions for the topic at stake, whether inspired by precedence or not, to help them utilize their diplomacy to the fullest.

Delegates are required to utilize critical thinking during the conference, allowing them to take logical and methodical actions in response to any unexpected setbacks and developments in the debate.

Delegates are strongly advised to seek opportunities for multilateral cooperation, such as building blocks, negotiating clauses, and drafting resolutions, to promote inclusive, coherent, and diplomatic outcomes.



## Questions to Consider

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1. How can Southeast Asian countries gain from Chinese investments without hurting their national sovereignty or falling into debt traps?
2. Should there be an international framework for regulating large-scale foreign investment in developing countries? And if yes, how would it operate?
3. How can ASEAN countries ensure the fair distribution of gains regarding the benefits of such projects?
4. In what ways can digital infrastructure investments pose a threat to sovereignty, and how should governments tackle this issue?
5. How can Southeast Asian nations balance their relationships with major global powers like China and the United States to maintain geopolitical stability?
6. What mechanisms can be introduced to hold both governments and foreign investors accountable for social and environmental impacts?
7. Which approach should the UN take to mediate or monitor political pressures or coercive diplomacy in bilateral relations between China and Southeast Asian countries?
8. Which actions could be taken by the Western world to offer equivalent alternatives to Chinese investment? How to make sure that no political meddling is taking place?

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