Chapter 2
China–ASEAN Community of a Shared Future Under COVID-19: Dual Influence and Policy Recommendations

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2.1 Introduction

In the past two decades, China and ASEAN has built a solid and vigorous partnership with booming pragmatic trade, economic and cultural cooperation, cordial political ties, and increasing military-to-military exchanges, which paved the way for the construction of China–ASEAN community of a shared future. The widespread COVID-19 pandemic, of course, imposed a complicated and enduring influence on the construction of China–ASEAN community of a shared future. So far, the existing studies have not comprehensively and thoroughly investigated into this subject and have not effectively responded to the following three crucial questions. Is the pandemic promoting or hindering the construction of China–ASEAN community of a shared future? How does the pandemic promote or hinder the construction of China–ASEAN community of a shared future? How do we promote the construction of China–ASEAN community of a shared future under the background of the pandemic?

Given this, this chapter examines the dual influence of the pandemic on the construction of China–ASEAN community of a shared future by analyzing a vast amount of data, media news and research reports, and puts forward corresponding policy recommendations to build a closer China–ASEAN community of a shared future. The structure of this chapter is as follows: the first part raises research questions and introduce the main content; the second and third part examines the negative and positive impact of the pandemic on the construction of China–ASEAN Community of a shared future respectively; the fourth part summarizes the main viewpoints of this chapter and puts forward some policy recommendations to promote the construction of China–ASEAN Community of a shared future.

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2.2 Negative Impact of the COVID-19 on China–ASEAN Community of a Shared Future

China and ASEAN countries are geographically close with high degree of economic interdependence and frequent people to people exchanges. The pandemic has inevitably had a short-term impact on bilateral economic and trade cooperation, heightened the anti-Chinese resentment among some ASEAN countries, and increased the pressure on ASEAN countries to “take side” between China and the US.

2.2.1 Ongoing Economic Turbulence

China has become ASEAN’s largest trading partner for 11 consecutive years, while ASEAN became China’s second largest trade partner in 2019. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the logistics is blocked, the work resumption is delayed, and the Spring Festival holiday is extended, all of these factors have led to the decreasing foreign trade in China.1 At the same time, ASEAN countries upgraded quarantine measures and even temporarily closed border trade ports in an attempt to block the import of virus from China, and thus moderating the growth momentum of China–ASEAN trade. In the first two months of 2020, the total volume of bilateral trade between China and ASEAN was 594.113 billion Yuan, down 3.6% year on year.2 However, it has been on the rise since March. From March to June, the total volume of bilateral trade between China and ASEAN increased by 6.1%, 5.7%, 4.2% and 5.6% respectively.3 The main reasons are as follows: the spread of the pandemic in China has been effectively controlled, the resumption of work and production of enterprises has been accelerated, and the trade growth has gradually recovered; China’s demand for intermediate products and manufactured goods has rebounded4; the border trade ports have resumed customs clearance, and the border trade has returned to normal; the temporary proposal of Public Health Emergencies of International Concern (PHEIC) automatically lapsed on April 31,5 ASEAN countries have lifted trade restrictions on China, and bilateral trade has returned to normal.

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1China’s Central Government (2020).
2General Administration of Customs of the People’s Republic of China (2020).
3Ibid.
4AMRO (2020).
5According to International Health Regulations, if sure is a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), the Director-General of the World Health Organization shall issue a temporary recommendations according to the procedure, including temporary health restriction measures to states parties, baggage, cargo, containers, vehicles, items, and (or) parcel, which can be revoked at any time according to the procedure. If there is no modification, cancellation, or declaration for three months, temporary recommendations will void automatically three months after publishing. See China News (2020).
China’s investment in ASEAN has also been affected in the short term due to the spreading pandemic and the anti-epidemic measures in Southeast Asian states. According to the prediction of Thailand Krungthai Research Center, if China’s economic growth drops by 1.0%, the total amount of China’s FDI in ASEAN is expected to drop by about 2.8%, which will directly cause economic losses of about US$ 2.4–3.4 billion in ASEAN, accounting for 0.07–0.11% of ASEAN’s GDP.\(^6\) However, with the rapid and effective control of the pandemic in China and the alleviation of the pandemic in Southeast Asia, China’s non-financial FDI in ASEAN countries is still growing. According to China’s Belt and Road Portal, China’s FDI to 54 BRI route countries mainly including Singapore, Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Kazakhstan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the first half of 2020 reached 57.1 billion Yuan, an increase of 23.8% over the same period of last year.\(^7\)

Yet, China’s oversea engineering contracting projects in ASEAN decreased due to the border closure, flight suspension and the tough quarantine policy imposed by ASEAN states. In the first half of 2020, China signed 2,289 new contracts for overseas engineering contracting projects in 59 BRI route countries, with a newly signed contract value of RMB 424.02 billion, down 1.7% year-on-year; and the completed turnover of RMB 250.12 billion, down 4.4% year-on-year.\(^8\) China’s BRI projects in Southeast Asia are facing difficulties in personnel shortage, material shortage, demand reduction and tight capital, and some projects are shut down.\(^9\) However, due to the proper pandemic prevention and control measures and financial and policy support, especially accelerating the opening of the “fast lane” for personnel exchanges and “green channel” for logistics between China and ASEAN countries, the overseas investment projects undergoing at present are generally running smoothly on the whole and doesn’t delay due to the outbreak of the pandemic.\(^10\)

China–ASEAN tourism cooperation has also been severely damaged by the pandemic in a short period of time. At present, China has become the largest tourist source country of ASEAN. Chinese tourists account for more than 20% of ASEAN countries’ foreign tourists. The direct and indirect contribution rate of tourism to ASEAN countries’ GDP is as high as 14 and 30%.\(^11\) After the outbreak of the pandemic, the number of Chinese tourists in ASEAN countries has plummeted, and

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\(^6\)China-ASEAN Exposition (2020).

\(^7\)Zhao (2020).

\(^8\)Ibid.

\(^9\)Zhang and Tang (2020).

\(^10\)Li (2020), Chinese enterprises steadily promote construction of overseas “belt and road” key project thumbed up by local people (2020). The ‘belt and road’ cooperation project has been smoothly promoted. ‘China has injected confidence into Us with actions’ (2020). Development financial support will be provided to high-quality joint belt and road projects and enterprises affected by the pandemic (2020).

\(^11\)In 2018, more than 29.6 million Chinese tourists entered ASEAN countries, accounting for 22.95% of the total number of foreign tourists (129 million) in ASEAN. Chinese tourists account for more than 30% of foreign tourists in Cambodia and Vietnam, and nearly 30% in Thailand. See China–ASEAN Center (2020), AMRO (2020).
the tourism industry has been greatly impacted. In the first quarter of 2020, the tourism performance of ASEAN dropped by about 36%, the number of international tourists dropped by about 34%, the hotel reservation rate dropped to a low point, and many reservation itineraries were cancelled.\textsuperscript{12} In particular, the ASEAN countries with high proportion of Chinese tourists, such as Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia, are mostly affected. On February 6, Vietnam’s Tourism Administration issued a news release saying that the tourism industry is expected to cause losses of US$ 5.9–7.7 billion in the first quarter due to the adverse impact of the pandemic. Among them, the number of Chinese tourists is expected to reduce by 90–100%, which are approximately 1.7–1.9 million person-times (equivalent to the loss of about US$ 1.8–2 billion).\textsuperscript{13} According to Thailand Tourism Bureau, the number of tourists to Thailand fell 44.3% year on year in February this year, among which the number of Chinese tourists dropped sharply by 85.3%. If the condition of the pandemic continues to deteriorate, the number of tourists in Thailand will decrease by about 9.8 million, or 22%.\textsuperscript{14} As Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said, the number of foreign tourists entering Cambodia fell by 60% in February this year, with Chinese tourists falling by 90%.\textsuperscript{15} Deputy speaker of the House of Representatives of the Philippines, Johnny Pimentel, said the Philippines are expected to lose 1.2 million Chinese tourists in 2020 due to the travel ban.\textsuperscript{16} Kamaludin, chairman of the Malaysian Hotel Association, pointed out more than 157,000 hotel room reservations in Malaysia had been cancelled by February 17, resulting in a loss of about 66 million ringgit.\textsuperscript{17} Indonesia is expected to lose about US$2 billion due to a sharp drop of the Chinese tourists.\textsuperscript{18} Although most of the ASEAN states have relaxed entry restrictions, resumed some international flights, and lifted the travel ban since July, the tourism sector would not be recovered quickly as these measures are mainly aimed at their own citizens, diplomat and international organizations officials, business people, professional and technical personnel and franchisees, rather than foreign tourists. According to Angela, Vice Minister of Tourism and Innovation Economy of Indonesia, it will take at least five years for ASEAN tourism to return to normal level.\textsuperscript{19} Therefore, it can be predicted that the China–ASEAN tourism cooperation would still experience the negative impact of the pandemic in the short term.

\textsuperscript{12}Reddaksi (2020).
\textsuperscript{13}Business Office of the Chinese Embassy in Vietnam (2020).
\textsuperscript{14}The Bangkok Post (2020).
\textsuperscript{15}Huang (2020).
\textsuperscript{16}Oversea China (2020).
\textsuperscript{17}Ye (2020).
\textsuperscript{18}Indonesia Window (2020).
\textsuperscript{19}Reddaksi (2020).
2.2.2 Rising Anti-Chinese Sentiment

With China’s rapid rise as a global economic, political and military power, ASEAN countries’ anxiety about China’s rise is also rising simultaneously. According to the questionnaire survey released by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute) in January 2020, 71.9% of the people in Southeast Asia are worried about the expansion of China’s economic influence, and 85.4% of them concerned that Southeast Asia become China’s political and strategic sphere of influence. The pandemic has magnified ASEAN countries’ fear of China and potential discrimination against Chinese people. As Kristi Govella, an assistant professor from University of Hawaii at Manoa, said: “the widespread political, economic expansion and concerns associated with China have exacerbated some of the xenophobic. These emotions are intertwined with recent concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic”.

After the outbreak of the pandemic, different forms of discrimination against Chinese appeared in ASEAN countries, and the anti-Chinese sentiment was also on the rise. First of all, fake videos about unsanitary habits of Chinese, especially eating wild animals, were widely spread on social media in ASEAN countries, and the Chinese were accused of being the “culprits” of the spread of the COVID-19. This has intensified the anger and resentment against China among the people of some ASEAN countries. Among Twitter users in Thailand, the video of “stop eating bats,” “don’t be surprised that the Chinese have created a new virus,” and that Chinese people eat raw meat were widely distributed. Malaysian social media also ridiculed the Chinese by accusing them of eating wild animals that caused the spread of the COVID-19. Abdul Halim, an Islamic teacher in Singapore, claimed that Chinese people do not wash their hands after excretion, and their living habits are not as hygienic as Muslims, which is why the virus spreads. Indonesia’s What’s app has widely spread a rumor that Chinese products can carry and spread the COVID-19, pointing the contradiction to the Chinese mobile phone brand “Xiaomi”, and calling on the public to abandon the “Xiaomi” mobile phone.

Secondly, the vast majority of the people from ASEAN countries ask the government to impose entry restrictions or issue travel bans to stop Chinese citizens from entering the country temporarily. Since the rapid spread of the pandemic in China in late January, Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Myanmar, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia immediately introduced entry restrictions on Chinese citizens, with the exception of Cambodia and Thailand. Even so, the Thai

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20 Tang (2020).
21 Rich (2020).
22 Reuters (2020).
23 Sukumaran (2020).
24 Kurohi (2020).
25 Sukumaran (2020), Walton (2020).
26 Among ASEAN countries, Vietnam was the first to announce entry restrictions for Chinese citizens (Jan. 31), Followed by Myanmar (Feb. 1) and Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Laos and Brunei (Feb. 2), and Thailand (Mar. 9). So far, only Cambodia remains open to Chinese citizens.
government announced on March 9 that more stringent entry measures, including filling in health declaration forms and 14 days of isolation, were adopted for inbound tourists from China, South Korea, Italy and Iran because of concerns about the outbreak of a pandemic in popular tourist attractions visited mostly by Chinese tourists. So far, except for Cambodia, all the ASEAN countries have imposed entry restrictions or issued travel bans on China.

Thirdly, in some ASEAN countries with anti-China traditions, some hotels and restaurants refuse to offer Chinese accommodation and meals, and some activists also appeal to the Chinese for “going back”. After the outbreak of the pandemic, some Filipinos criticized the Duterte Administration for failing to respond to the pandemic quickly and effectively because it tries to maintain a close relationship with China, and transferred their dissatisfaction to the Chinese living in the Philippines and thus causing an anti-China wave in the country. Worrying about the spread of the pandemic, hundreds of Indonesians protested against the entry of 170 Chinese tourists to Indonesia outside the Novotel Hotel in the tourist city of Bukittinggi, and set up roadblocks around the hotel to prevent Chinese tourists from leaving the hotel. At the same time, some Indonesian netizens encouraged local people to stay away from Chinese people and Chinese living in Indonesia and their working and living places on social media such as twitter, Facebook and Instagram. In central Hoi An, a popular tourist destination in Vietnam, a temporary sign was put up outside the Baguette restaurant called bread box: “sorry, we can’t treat Chinese people!”. The Da Nang Riverside Hotel announced that it would not accept any Chinese guests due to the COVID-19. Even in Thailand, where anti-Chinese sentiment is weak, racial hatred speech that calls for Chinese to roll back appears on social media uncommonly.

The anti-Chinese sentiment triggered by the pandemic has aroused a high degree of vigilance in Southeast Asian countries, prompting countries to use judicial and administrative means to crack down on false news of the COVID-19 and racist words towards Chinese. In the Philippines, where resentment against China is rising rapidly, President Duterte publicly called on the citizens to stop publicizing anti-Chinese sentiment on social media, stressing that the Chinese should not be blamed for the spread of the COVID-19. The Ministry of Justice of the Philippines has also entrusted the National Bureau of Investigation to strictly investigate the fake news of the COVID-19. Malaysia’s Media Communications Commission began to review fake information about the COVID-19 on social media. Law enforcement authorities arrested 12 citizens who have spreaded fake news about the COVID-19 and incited racial hatred, and they faced up to two years’ imprisonment and a total

27 The Star (2020).
28 Aspinwall (2020).
29 The Quarter Bag (2020).
30 Walton (2020).
31 Rich (2020).
32 Sehrlich (2020).
33 Romero (2020).
34 Jalli (2020).
fine of $12000.\textsuperscript{35} The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology of Indonesia, together with anti-defamation social organizations, searched for and deleted false news related to the COVID-19. The law enforcement authorities arrested six citizens who have spreaded fake news about the COVID-19, and they faced a maximum sentence of six years.\textsuperscript{36} According to the Computer Crime Act, the Thai government arrested four citizens who have spreaded fake news about the COVID-19, and they faced up to five years’ imprisonment.\textsuperscript{37} In the speech, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong called on all countries to work together to curb anti-Chinese sentiment.\textsuperscript{38} Meanwhile, Singapore also cracked down online fake news according to Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), and the offenders will face up to 10 years’ imprisonment and a fine of US$6,000.\textsuperscript{39} Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Chun Fuk has signed an administrative decree, imposing a maximum penalty of 20 million Vietnamese Dong on the offenders who spread fake news about the COVID-19 on social media.\textsuperscript{40} The Cambodia Department of Information and Broadcasting alleged that Facebook users should stop creating and spreading fake news, otherwise they will be severely punished for trying to damage the government’s reputation and make profits.\textsuperscript{41} Under the deterrence and attack of “severe law and punishment”, the resentment against Chinese in Southeast Asian countries has been curbed timely and effectively.

### 2.2.3 Increasing Pressure on ASEAN States to “Take Sides” Between China and the US

The pandemic has intensified the strategic competition between China and the US, and has also increased the pressures on ASEAN countries to “take sides” between the two great powers. On the one hand, the US spared no effort in criticizing China for failing to inform WHO of the pandemic information in time, concealing the truth of the pandemic, and threatening to hold China to account after the pandemic. This forces ASEAN countries to be wary of cooperation with China. In fact, ASEAN countries are ready to accept more pressure from the US, which includes signing the agreement to blame China for spreading the COVID-19, refusing loans from China, and stopping purchasing the 5G equipment from HUAWEI.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{36}Indonesia arrests six over coronavirus internet hoaxes (2020).  
\textsuperscript{37}Arrests over fake news jump across Asia to stem coronavirus ‘Info-demic’ (2020).  
\textsuperscript{38}Wei (2020).  
\textsuperscript{39}Bociaga (2020).  
\textsuperscript{40}The Saigon Times (2020).  
\textsuperscript{41}Hao (2020).  
\textsuperscript{42}Schwarz (2020).
On the other hand, the economic recovery of the US has yet seemed to arrive due to the spreading COVID-19 in the country, which has restricted the economic cooperation between the US and ASEAN. Chinese economy bounces back into growth, and thus enhancing China’s influence in Southeast Asia which is mainly export-oriented and relies deeply on foreign investment. Given this, ASEAN states are trying to avoid upsetting China when dealing with the pandemic, so as to maintain its close economic relations with China. Moreover, countries that provide “friendly understanding, support and assistance” to China during the outbreak may gain special advantages after the pandemic. Therefore, despite the pressure from the US, ASEAN countries will not easily “take side”, but try to strike a balance between the two powers.

In addition, the US hyped China to strengthen its military presence in the SCS during the pandemic and encouraged some ASEAN countries to resist China. In US–ASEAN Foreign Ministers video conference on COVID-19 held on April 23 this year, U.S. Secretary of State Pempeo publicly accused China of threatening its neighbors in the SCS and called on them to affix China. On July 13, Pompeo issued the so-called SCS statement, fully denying China’s sovereignty, rights and relevant claims over the SCS, and encouraged claimant states to oppose China’s claims. Although most of the ASEAN nations have temporarily put aside the SCS dispute due to the actual needs of humanitarian assistance and the common threat of the spread of the pandemic, the criticism on China’s assertiveness in the SCS has increased in some claimant states. In January this year, Indonesian protested the illegally fishing of Chinese fishing boats in the waters of Natuna. In April, Vietnam and the Philippines simultaneously accused Chinese Coast Guard vessels of crashing and sinking Vietnamese fishing boats. In August, Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishamuddin publicly opposed China’s claims of historical rights in the SCS and accused China of lacking international legal basis for its claims. In the mean time, some claimant states accelerated the illegal unilateral actions of oil and gas exploration, and strengthened naval cooperation with the US during the pandemic, which continuously stir up troubles in the SCS and thus adversely affecting the construction of China–ASEAN Community of a shared future.

43 Ibid.
44 du Rocher (2020).
45 Zhang (2020).
46 People’s Daily (2020).
47 Pitlo (2020).
48 Rajagopalan (2020).
49 The Straits Times (2020).
2.3 Positive Impact of COVID-19 on the Construction of China–ASEAN Community of a Shared Future

Despite the negative impacts, China and ASEAN countries have gradually deepened their mutual trust in the joint fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, which is conducive to the construction of China–ASEAN community of a shared future.

2.3.1 ASEAN Supported China for Fighting Against the COVID-19

ASEAN countries have always actively supported China for fighting against the COVID-19, and the whole Southeast Asia has been portrayed as a strong supporter for China.\(^{50}\) This fully demonstrates the sense of community that China and ASEAN share a same destiny and common weal and woe. Shortly after the outbreak of the pandemic (February 5), Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen paid a special visit to China to “support” China’s “battle against COVID-19”, which made him the first foreign leader visit China during the pandemic. Subsequently, the top leaders of ASEAN countries mainly including Brunei, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, ASEAN Secretary General and Defense Secretary General, as well as the diplomatic envoys of ASEAN countries in China, government officials and representatives of industry associations also voiced their support in various forms to support China’s fight against COVID-19.

Moreover, some ASEAN countries have provided China with urgently needed anti-epidemic materials and daily necessities under the condition of limited supply. They have interpreted the spirit of the community of a shared future to help each other and share weal and woe through practical actions. For example, the Cambodian Ministry of Defense donated 300,000 medical masks and 1,500 sets of protective suits to China; Vietnam provided medical supplies worth about US$ 500,000; Malaysia donated 8 tons of masks, gloves and other medical materials; and the Myanmar government donated 200 tons of rice.\(^{51}\) With the remarkable achievements made by China in fighting against the COVID-19, ASEAN countries praised China’s anti-epidemic actions and fully affirmed China’s important contribution to maintaining

\(^{50}\)Lye (2020).

\(^{51}\)Due to space limitation, the donation details of local governments, enterprises, social organizations and individuals of ASEAN countries are not included. In fact, the amount of donations from ASEAN countries to China is large. For example, Thailand’s Zhengda Group donated 30 million Yuan, 20 million Yuan worth of food and medical supplies, and 1.2 million Yuan worth of 33 tons of disinfectant, and hundreds of thousands of dollars and millions of masks and other medical materials from all sectors of the society. See Thai Headlines (2020), Myanmar Chinese Network (2020).
regional and global public health security.\textsuperscript{52} The pandemic makes the internalization trend of China–ASEAN “privileged relationship” more and more prominent, and also reflects the acceptance and dependence of ASEAN countries on China’s soft power.\textsuperscript{53}

\subsection*{2.3.2 China’s Assistance to ASEAN in the Fight Against the COVID-19}

As the saying goes, “You throw a peach to me, and I give you a plum for friendship”. At the most difficult time for China, ASEAN countries fully supported China’s fight against the virus. After the “strong rebound” of the pandemic in Southeast Asia, China also made every effort to provide material and technical assistance to ASEAN countries, so as to consolidate the foundation of the China–ASEAN community of a shared future. With the emergence of the second confirmed case of COVID-19 in early March this year, the pressure of pandemic prevention and control in Cambodia sharply increased. At this critical moment, China decided to provide COVID-19 detection equipment to help Cambodia fight against the virus more effectively.\textsuperscript{54} China also urgently provided Cambodia with raw textile materials which are in shortage in the garment industry—Cambodia’s pillar industry.\textsuperscript{55} Similarly, at the time when the Philippines is facing a shortage of medical supplies and equipment, China has provided urgently needed medical materials such as test kits and protective suits, and actively dispatched medical experts to help the Philippines survive the difficult time of fighting against COVID-19.\textsuperscript{56} China has also delivered 40 tons of medical supplies to Indonesia, the country mostly affected by the pandemic in Southeast Asia. Similar situations have taken place throughout the whole Southeast Asia.

In addition, the Southeast Asian governments have participated in activities organized by Chinese embassies, praising China for providing much-needed medical assistance.\textsuperscript{57} On August 24, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang announced at the third Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Initiatives (LMC) Leaders’ video conference that a special public health fund would be set up under the framework of the LMC special fund to continuously provide anti-epidemic materials and technical support to the Mekong countries within its ability. China also promised that the new vaccine would be provided to Mekong countries preferentially after it is developed and put into use.\textsuperscript{58} Before that, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also announced to give prior consideration to the Philippines’ request of obtaining the new vaccine.

\textsuperscript{52}Zhang (2020).
\textsuperscript{53}du Rocher (2020).
\textsuperscript{54}Li (2020).
\textsuperscript{55}Mao (2020).
\textsuperscript{56}Wang (2020).
\textsuperscript{57}Heydarian (2020).
\textsuperscript{58}Wang et al. (2020).
2.3.3 China–ASEAN Public Health Cooperation

In addition to bilateral cooperation on fighting against the COVID-19, China and ASEAN has also actively promoted regional public health cooperation, and thus enriching the connotation of China–ASEAN community of a shared future. On February 20, the first China–ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Special Meeting on the COVID-19 was held in Vientiane, Laos. During the meeting, Wang Yi proposed four cooperation initiatives and said that the fight against the COVID-19 would become another success story of ASEAN–China cooperation. Indonesia’s Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi, also proposed to establish a hotline between China and ASEAN to exchange the latest information on the pandemic, to establish an ASEAN–China Health Minister’s special joint workgroup to share virus related information and data, and to establish multinational expert teams and jointly develop and produce vaccines. Later, Special ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit on COVID-19 via video conference was jointly held in April 14 by China, ASEAN, Japan and South Korea as the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic worsened rapidly. All parties reached a consensus on curbing the spread of the pandemic, improving the level of public health governance, and promoting the recovery of economic development in East Asia as soon as possible. Under the new situation that China has made important progress in fighting against the COVID-19 and the pandemic in Southeast Asia continues to spread, the urgency of China–ASEAN public health cooperation is becoming more and more important.

2.4 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The construction of a community of a shared future between China and ASEAN has been under dual impact from the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, the trade and investment cooperation between China and ASEAN countries in the early stage of the outbreak showed a downward trend in varying degrees, and the tourism cooperation was mostly affected. However, with the gradual alleviation of the pandemic, there are signs of recovery in the field of trade and investment, while the recovery of tourism needs more time. At the beginning of the outbreak of the pandemic, Southeast Asian society’s fear and resentment towards China increased, whilst it declined rapidly after the severe crackdown on the spread of false information in Southeast Asia and China’s remarkable progress in the fight against the pandemic as well as its active assistance to ASEAN states.

The pandemic has also intensified the strategic competition between China and the US, and has increased the pressure on ASEAN states to “take sides” between the two great powers. For one thing, ASEAN states have not only been pressured

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59 Zhang (2020).
60 Harian Nusantara (2020).
61 Zheng (2019).
by the US to alienate them from China, but also been encouraged to resist China in the SCS. For another, ASEAN states highly rely on Chinese economic resource and thus avoiding provoking China. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, China and ASEAN countries have supported each other and cooperated to fight against the COVID-19, thereby mutual trust was enhanced, traditional friendship was strengthened, and the sense of community of a shared future was deepened. In addition, China and ASEAN also take the pandemic as an opportunity to explore and promote regional public health cooperation, so as to promote China–ASEAN regional cooperation and consolidate the public opinion basis of China–ASEAN community of a shared future.

Generally speaking, the pandemic has had a certain degree of negative impact on the construction of China–ASEAN Community of a shared future in the fields of economic cooperation, people-to-people exchange, and maritime disputes in the SCS. Most importantly, it should be highly aware of the serious consequences of U.S. escalating military actions taking against China in the SCS. For instance, the risk of the collision between the U.S. warships and Chinese naval vessels in the SCS, either unexpected or expected, is increasing. Additionally, some claimant states may further enhance maritime cooperation with the US and strengthen policy coordination with each other, and thus to unite against China in the SCS. Nonetheless, the negative impact is gradually decreasing as the trade and investment cooperation between China and ASEAN returned to normal and the anti-Chinese sentiment in Southeast Asia reduced. What’s more, the positive effect of the pandemic on the construction of China–ASEAN Community of a shared future is increasingly prominent due to the joint efforts of fighting against the COVID-19.

In the new context of the COVID-19 pandemic, China and ASEAN should seize opportunity to deepen cooperation in the fields of trade and investment, people-to-people exchanges and maritime security, and accelerate the construction of a closer China–ASEAN community of a shared future.

First, speed up the construction of “fast lane” for personnel exchanges and “green channel” for logistics during the pandemic between China and ASEAN, and consolidate the rebound trend of bilateral trade and investment. At present, China has opened “fast lane” or “green channel” with some ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar and Indonesia. In the near future, China should continue to improve the efficiency of customs clearance with these countries, and expand the fast pass to other ASEAN countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia and Laos as soon as possible.

Second, the tracking service mechanism of BRI should be perfected during the pandemic in order to ensure the safe and orderly progress of the BRI projects. Although the BRI projects in Southeast Asia have not been postponed extensively since the outbreak of the epidemic, the negative factors such as the reduction of the project financing channel, the risk of default of the project, and the financial difficulties facing by ASEAN countries are indeed present. Therefore, China needs to construct the tracking service mechanism with the aim to assess the sustainability and progress of the BRI projects. It should cancel a number of projects with high risks while providing corresponding financial support for the mega-projects with
low risks according to the assessment. China should also establish communication and coordination mechanism for BRI projects with ASEAN countries during the pandemic, focusing on solving the problems of work resumption, procurement and transportation of the raw material, delay delivery of projects, and considering appropriate debt relief according to the financial pressure and reasonable demands of ASEAN countries.

The third is to improve the stability of the industrial chain and supply chain in the region, and thus consolidating the economic foundation of China–ASEAN community of a shared future. After the outbreak of the pandemic, the global industrial chain and supply chain are narrowed down and localized. China and ASEAN should take the opportunity to enhance the industrial cooperation and construct a more resilient and sustainable industrial chain and supply chain under the BRI and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) framework. Both sides should also take the construction of China–ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) and the significant industrial parks as a platform to deepen cooperation in the fields of medical industry, digital economy, artificial intelligence and 5G technology and tourism industry.

Fourth, China should continue to carry out the “Covid diplomacy” and consolidate the political ties and the public opinion foundation of China–ASEAN community of a shared future. China can continue to extend assistance to some ASEAN states with greater pressure on epidemic prevention and control by allocating special funds under the China–ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund and LMC, and give priority to providing vaccines to ASEAN countries.

The fifth is to build a public health cooperation mechanism between China and ASEAN, and thus adding new impetus to the construction of China–ASEAN community of a shared future. China should push forward the implementation of the “four initiatives” in the special Ministers’ conference on the COVID-19 and the three consensus reached by the leaders’ special conference, and carry out practical cooperation in the fields of information and experience sharing, joint prevention and control of pandemic, assistance of medical materials, equipment and technology, so as to enhance the regional public health cooperation and build a closer China–ASEAN community with a shared future.

Sixth, China and ASEAN should speed up the Code of Conduct (COC) negotiation and jointly safeguard the peace and stability in the SCS. So far, the US has upgraded the military operation in the SCS in order to deter China’s expanding presence in the disputed waters, and supported the unilateral oil and gas exploration conducted by some claimant states, resulting in rising tensions in the SCS. At this critical juncture, China and ASEAN should set out new rules that make SCS a sea of peace, friendship and cooperation by concluding the COC negotiation as soon as possible, and promoted the pragmatic maritime cooperation under the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS (DOC) framework.
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