

Session Title: China and ASEAN: Managing a complex relationship

Panelists:

- **Mohamed JAWHAR Hassan**, Chairman, Institute of Strategic & International Studies, Malaysia
- **Meidyatama SURYODININGRAT**, Editor-in-Chief, The Jakarta Post, Indonesia
- **XU Ningning 许宁宁**, Executive Vice Secretary-General, China-ASEAN Business Council, People's Republic of China
- **ZHENG Yongnian 郑永年**, Professor & Director, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, Singapore

Moderator: Warren FERNANDEZ, Editor, The Straits Times, Singapore Press Holdings, Singapore

For the last 30 years, China and ASEAN have had strong strategic and economic ties. China has become a great global power, and more recently, it has started to emerge as a superpower. However, as **Zheng Yongnian** mentioned, ongoing territorial disputes between China and many ASEAN countries reflect that China is not yet quite powerful and influential enough to obtain systematic obedience from its ASEAN neighbors. Amidst rising tensions, will all parties have the political will to ensure that territorial disputes do not impede the deepening of economic relations? What are possible win-win solutions to the on-going territorial disputes?

The relationship between China and its ASEAN neighbors is a paradox of cooperation and contention. Increased cooperation and economic integration are counterbalanced by resource nationalism and increased militarization. Cooperation and multilateral resolution were unfamiliar concepts among East and South East Asian countries before the founding of ASEAN and the creation of APEC. **Meidyatama Suryodiningrat** stressed that competition for natural resources and the lack of any legal precedent to resolve ongoing disputes are the main reasons why tensions continue to rise.

Mohamed Jawhar Hassan cautioned that interference from powers outside ASEAN may be counterproductive to efforts to build trust and reinforce political and economic ties in the region. While open conflict remains a remote possibility, all parties need to respond with a softer hand and be committed to reaching a mutually beneficial diplomatic outcome.



Xu Ningning suggested that a joint exploration and development of resources on contested territories could be a possible next step. **Jawhar** added that the development of a joint cohesive policy and a Code of Conduct could provide a framework to maintain healthy cross-border relations.

Suryodiningrat further added that commercial businesses should continue to build and strengthen cross-border economic relations, stating that mutual profit in the long run will make conflict too costly.

Working around and living with bilateral disputes has always been a constant among ASEAN nations. Yet, they have managed to maintain relative harmony, with irrevocable differences being settled by international organizations such as the International Court of Justice. Developing the existing framework to include China as well as establishing strong cross border economic and trade links will ensure that open conflict is unbearable and possibly become the best way to spur China and ASEAN to build trust and cooperation on all levels of governance.

