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“China’s Relations with Asia ”

*China’s Relations with Asia : Past, Present and
Future*

by

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China's Relations with Asia: Past, Present and Future

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On 1 October 1949, the People's Republic of China was founded, thus opening up a new era in the development of her relations with Asia. China is located in Asia, and also among the countries that have the largest number of neighbors, and she has a host of countries and regions in the vicinity. Because of that, developing good-neighborly and friendly relations with Asian countries has always been a key point of China's diplomacy since the founding of PRC. This paper is to address the development of China-Asia relations in past, present, and future.

From the founding of PRC to late 1970s

After the founding of PRC, the priority for China's diplomacy was to establish diplomatic relations with various countries in the world. Asian countries provided

China with good opportunities to break ground for diplomatic work. Many of them had successively established diplomatic relations with China since then.

The process of establishing ties with Asian countries demonstrated China's sincerity and good will to have the friendly relations with them. For achieving it, China made great efforts as follows:

Firstly, advocating the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. The Five Principles, namely, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence, was first put forward by Premier Zhou Enlai. In 1954, China proposed the Five Principles together with India and Myanmar respectively. The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence has been China's basic norms in handling mutual relations with Asian countries since then.

Secondly, put forward the principle of "seeking common ground while reserving differences". In April 1955, Premier Zhou Enlai put forward the principle of "seeking common ground while reserving differences" when he led the Chinese delegation participated in the Asian-African Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, making great contributions to the conference in ways of ensuring its right direction of unity and achievement of important results. Also, it indicated that China realized that she needs to pay high attention to the differences between China and Asian countries. It is obvious that China could by no way develop without her friendly relations with Asian countries.

Thirdly, seeking solution to border disputes. China had some territorial disputes with

her neighboring countries. On issues left by history pending solutions, China has consistently advocated that solution should be reached by peaceful negotiations. Through years of preparation in the 1950s, a series of agreements and treaties were eventually concluded in the 1960s between China and some of her neighbors respectively for resolving boundary disputes on the basis of the Five Principles.

From late 1970s to the present

China's reform and opening up, hailed as a great revolution, has not only transformed the country in a thorough way but also produced a significant influence on China-Asia relations.

From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, China's primary task had been to improve and develop relations with Asian countries in the following aspects: country-to-country relations, party-to-party relations, external economic relations and peaceful settlement of disputes.

Firstly, China dealt with state-to-state relations based on national interests, and properly handled the differences in ideology between countries. As early as 1978, Mr. Deng Xiaoping emphasized the importance of developing state-to-state relations on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence.¹ That is to say, the Five Principles is applied to develop China's friendly and cooperative relations with all countries in the world. As a result, China has created a favorable periphery for peace and development by establishing friendly relations with all Asian countries.

¹ *People Daily*, November 12, 1978.

Secondly, China set a new type of party-to-party relations as a part of its general diplomacy. The party-to-party relations had been one of the major causes of China's tensions with neighbors. Mr. Deng Xiaoping pointed out that we should distinguish party-to-party relations from state-to-state relations.¹ According to his thoughts, the Four Principles of developing party-to-party relations, namely, independence and self-determination, complete equality, mutual respect and non-interference in others' internal affairs, was formulated. Consequently, China not only located relations between parties in the right place but also eliminated the tensions.

Thirdly, China cooperated economically with developing countries in Asia. Majority of Asian countries are developing ones. China's economic cooperation with them has proved to be no less effective than that between China and developed ones because of economic mutual complementarities, and such equal and mutual benefit cooperation was to have broad prospect. China's economic cooperation with its neighbors laid a solid foundation for the development of bilateral friendly relations and promoted prosperity of both as well.

Fourthly, China creatively put forward the approaches of "shelve disputes and joint development" for peaceful resolution of territorial disputes. It was Mr. Deng Xiaoping who was the earliest one to have the new thinking. His initiative has not only brought new opportunities to resolve disputes by peaceful means, but also promoted the friendly relations between China and neighboring countries. Now China has solved 90% of her land boundary problems.

¹ *People Daily*, November 9, 1978.

After the end of the Cold War, China has advocated and implemented the new security concept featuring mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination. The security situation has greatly changed in this region and the world, the security interdependence among countries is ever growing, major powers in particular have overlapping interests in Asia, and their positions and policies would determine, to a great extent, whether security cooperation could be launched and whether it could be effective. With her peaceful development, China has attached great importance to security cooperation, actively participated in various security cooperation mechanisms in Asia, which have served to improve regional security environment, and had far-reaching effect on China's friendly relations with neighbors as developing and strengthening good-neighborly friendship with neighboring countries being the crucial component for building a long-term peaceful international environment.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has laid emphasis on common development with Asian countries while creating a peaceful surrounding environment for her economic development. China's friendship and cooperation with Asian countries have been further deepened and expanded. China's bilateral relations with Asian countries have been greatly developed and promoted with the establishment of different strategic partnerships or cooperative partnerships. China has actively participated in regional and sub-regional cooperation of various forms. All of these reflect China's desire to achieve win-win with Asian countries. This policy has also become a component part of China's general diplomatic strategy of peaceful development, which has included the following respects:

The first one is to maintain a stable periphery. China insists on settling disputes and hotspot issues in the region through peaceful negotiation and equal consultation. China has laid foundation for peaceful resolution to South China Sea disputes and played an important role alleviating the tensions by signing *the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*. China also issued *Joint Declaration on Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues* with ASEAN in order to safeguard regional security and stability. China is the first non-ASEAN country to formally join in *the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia*, and has even played a positive role in maintaining regional stability. All of these have served to create favorable conditions for maintaining stability in Asia.

The second one is to construct cooperation mechanisms. China has created new cooperation mechanisms like SCO, six-party talk while participating in existing mechanisms, which have greatly promoted peace and stability in Asia. The evolution of “Shanghai Five” into SCO has been an important diplomatic practice. The establishment of SCO has built an important platform for China’s participating in and facilitating cooperation with Central Asian countries. It is the SCO that has advocated the new type of state-to-state relations based on mutual trust, arms reduction and security cooperation, and initiated a new regional cooperation model with the characteristics of joint initiation by both big and small countries, priority of security issues and mutual benefit and coordination. Shanghai Spirit of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diversity of civilizations and pursuit of joint development serves not only as the basis for members to deal with relations with each

other, but also is significant in facilitating the construction of just and equitable international political and economic order.

The third one is to enhance strategic mutual trust. China has strengthened dialogue, exchange, coordination and cooperation with Asian countries, increased consensus, expanded common interests, and enhanced strategic mutual trust on the basis of equality and mutual respect and for the purposes of maintaining peace, stability and prosperity. China has constructed strategic partnership with major neighbors and regional organizations including Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity with ASEAN, Strategic Relations of Mutual Benefit with Japan, Strategic Cooperative Partnership with Russia, Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity with India. These strategic partnerships, though different in titles, are of the same purposes, that is, to expand common interests, and to maintain peripheral peace, stability and prosperity through dialogue and cooperation.

The fourth one is to promote common development. China has turned its own economic development into opportunities to be shared with neighboring countries, and stressed the necessity of mutual-dependence and cooperation so as to jointly shape peaceful surrounding environment. The spirit has embodied in ASEAN-China FTA; as a member of SCO, China has conducted all-round cooperation with Russia and Central Asian countries in various fields within the framework of the SCO; China was accepted as an observer of South Asian Association For Regional Cooperation (SAARC) on its 13th summit in November 2005; China participated in the development cooperation in the Great Mekong sub-region and Tumen River, and

regional economic cooperation among Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar, etc.

Prospects of China-Asia relations

China has become a good neighbor, good partner and good friend of her surrounding nations by implementing the policy of building the relations featuring good-neighborly ties and partnerships with Asian countries.

For special geopolitical reasons, China has to put the relations with Asia as one of her priorities. Without recognition by Asian countries, China's peaceful emergence could not be accepted in the world at large. China-Asia relations have made huge achievements so far. However, in order to construct a harmonious Asia and maintain the general stability, China should further consolidate and deepen the relations with Asia.

For China, to further develop her relations with Asia is primarily to deal with new challenges in the region. China-Asia relations have currently been the best since the founding of PRC, and could hopefully be maintained. But China should not overlook some factors that might cause instabilities, and in particular, some real and potential factors might undermine stability and development in Asia. Firstly, traditional and non-traditional security challenges are interwoven. Secondly, there are both theses of "China Threat" and "China Responsibility". China's rapid economic development and emergence have produced tremendous impact on Asian countries. Some countries actively cooperate with China to seek common development while some others regard China's development and emergence as a threat, and even want to check China with

domestic problems. Expectation of Asian countries on China is also rising with China's increasing comprehensive national power. Coexistence of the two theses adds to the difficulty and pressure that China handles relations with neighbors, and causes disharmonies in Asia. Thirdly, major powers' presence and behaviors in relevant regions have both positive and negative impact on China's relations with Asian countries. The global strategy and national interests of the United States, the only superpower after the Cold War, extend to all areas of the world, and in particular have huge influence in politics, economy and security in Asia. The consequent spillover of their presence and behavior will have effect on China's efforts to build and maintain peaceful and stable surrounding environment.

For the above-mentioned reasons, China should in the future set the objective of constructing "a harmonious Asia" and make in real sense a strategic foundation for China's peaceful development. In his important speech at the UN Summit commemorating the 60th anniversary of the United Nations, President Hu Jintao called on all countries to join hands and work together to build a harmonious world with long-lasting peace and common prosperity. For China, to build a harmonious world requires her first of all to build a harmonious Asia and to start with, to create a harmonious peripheral environment.

The essence of harmony is recognition, respect and accommodation. The connotation of harmony covers peace, inclusiveness, co-habitation of differences, dialectic integration of diversity and unity, and harmony of opposites that preserves divergences and individual identity. The way to harmony is seeking understanding

through dialogue, achieving win-win results through cooperation, and growing together through friendly co-existence. The idea of harmony is not only an ideal but also a means and methodology for handling issues.

Peace and development have become the themes of today's world, and various countries are all exploring the road of cooperation to realize the common themes. Meanwhile, the first 20 years of the 21st century will be the period of opportunity for China's peaceful development, and a harmonious, stable, cooperative and developing Asia is the precondition of China's peaceful development while China's development will enhance stability and prosperity of Asia. The 17th national congress of the CPC stresses China's wishes to cooperate with Asian countries: "for our neighboring countries, we will continue to follow the foreign policy of friendship and partnership, strengthen good-neighborly relations and practical cooperation with them, and energetically engage in regional cooperation in order to jointly create a peaceful, stable regional environment featuring equality, mutual trust and win-win cooperation".¹

Looking into the future, "a harmonious Asia" should be an indispensable part of "a harmonious world". China should become "a China of Asia", and Asia should not become "an Asia of China". Only when accepted by Asian countries, could China be accepted by the world, and could China's peaceful development road be materialized. The deeper China gets involved in the building of a harmonious Asia, the more China's peaceful development road can be guaranteed.

¹ "Hold high the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Striving for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects", Hu Jintao's speech at the 17th national congress of the CPC

On the one hand, China should learn the lessons of other major powers in handling relations with their neighbors in their rise. One of the common causes leading to the defeat of Germany and Japan in the Second World War is that they both formed military axis or sphere of influence challenging international system in their periphery. Former Soviet Union didn't regard their weak neighbors as potential security problems, consciously or unconsciously continued Tsar's policy seeking its own interests at the cost of neighbors, and its chauvinist policy has become one of the major causes of the radical change of East Europe and the disintegration of itself. Though the United States is the only country that has successfully risen to the status of world hegemony, its power is built upon bullying the weak, and has problems with Latin America. China should not duplicate the model of other powers in her rising, and peace and development should go through the whole process of China's rising and at all levels of China's relations with Asian countries. On the other hand, China should enhance dialogue, exchange and understanding with Asian countries, and make them accept the concept of "harmony". Only by that basis, "a harmonious Asia" could be truly achieved.