

VIEWS

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China's opening-up an opportunity for ASEAN

When China talks about opening up in the context of the 15th Five-Year Plan, it is not just reviving an old slogan and hoping for commendation. What is unfolding is a subtler, more ambitious strategy: institutional opening-up, restructuring rules, harmonizing with global norms and building new platforms for cross-border trade and investment. For China's trade partners, from ASEAN neighbors to bigger players such as the European Union and members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, this promises new opportunities. But it also raises strategic and implementation challenges.

What is striking about China's current push is its pivot from tariff reductions to deep governance reforms. Instead of the headline-grabbing tariff cuts of the 1990s and the World Trade Organization accession era, Beijing today is focused on aligning domestic regulatory structures with high-standard trade rule platforms, such as the CPTPP and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement. This signals an intent not just to open markets but to institutionalize openness in ways that can survive external shocks and geopolitical headwinds.

China's leadership wants to ensure its trade architecture is not reactive but rules-based and proactive. That is why institutional reforms, not just a simple fine tuning of the customs duty, are now the main course. China wants to be a responsible rule-maker, not just a powerful rule-taker.

Its decision to align with the CPTPP and DEPA is a recognition that a huge market alone will not attract global trade and investment flows. Aligning with high-standard trade rules means better intellectual property protections, more transparent government procurement processes, strengthened competition rules and clearer cross-border data governance.

From the perspective of foreign businesses, and ASEAN firms in particular, this could be transformative. Imagine an Indonesian digital services firm trying to export software or a Malaysian manufacturing supplier negotiating IP protections and dispute mechanisms that are predictable and internationally recognizable. These are precisely the sort of changes that high-standard trade rules are designed to ensure.

For a real-world illustration, look to Hainan's evolution. What was once an aspirational free trade zone is now island-wide special customs operations, exempting roughly 74 percent of tariff categories and allowing duty-free inland entry for sufficiently value-added products processed on the island.

For ASEAN exporters such as Vietnamese parts makers or Singaporean logistics firms, Hainan offers a sandbox to test new models of supply-chain cooperation. The port is also being prepared as a hub for the services trade, digital commerce and logistics. It is a 21st-century



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trade platform that does not just move goods faster but weaves regional supply chains more tightly together. Yet the buzz around Hainan also reveals a core tension. Even as tariff barriers drop, regulatory barriers, especially in services, capital flows and data rules, remain complex. The world has yet to fully solve how to govern data in cross-border commerce. Firms, particularly SMEs from ASEAN, will need to

invest in compliance complexities from the outset.

There are tangible gains on the table. Enhanced market access for goods and services, especially through negative lists, greater predictability in IP and competition regimes as China backfills its legal frameworks to match partners' expectations, new regional hubs like Hainan that can complement existing nodes in Singapore, Vietnam or Malaysia and a chance for ASEAN economies to plug into China's large domestic consumption market more deeply.

But these opportunities come with caveats. For one, pilot reforms in FTZs can take time to become mainstream practice. What works in Shanghai or Hainan might never fully scale nationwide due to local rules and conditions. And while China's foreign trade law revision explicitly references alignment with CPTPP standards, it also enhances tools for managing trade conflicts, revealing a simultaneous impulse toward control and opening-up.

Here is where it gets interesting. China's institutional opening-up is not just an economic tactic. It is a geopolitical strategy. By tightening rule coherence with partners across the Asia-Pacific, Beijing is slowly building an alternative economic architecture that could rival Western-centric frameworks. For

ASEAN nations like Indonesia, that means both an opportunity and a strategic balancing act.

Do you deepen engagement with China's high-standard initiatives and risk overdependence? Or do you hedge more with other frameworks like the EU, CPTPP outside China and RCEP? The answer is not an either-or. It is a practical multi-vector engagement strategy that leverages China's market while building resilience through diversification.

In conclusion, China's 15th Five-Year Plan institutional opening-up will not be a silver bullet. It is a complex juggernaut, part openness, part strategic orchestration, part regulatory evolution. For ASEAN partners, this represents a historic opportunity to enhance trade, investment and services cooperation. But seizing this opportunity means engaging with regulatory reform, not just market access.

It also means recognizing that China's opening-up is not a one-way street. It is a negotiated, co-constructed ecosystem where opportunity and challenge are inseparable.

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LI MIN / CHINA DAILY

Douglas de Castro

CPC's pragmatic path to prosperity benefits people

China's journey in the past more than 40 years is one of the most complicated case studies in modern international history. Since the start of the reform and opening-up era in 1978, the country has undergone a socioeconomic change that has never happened before in human history. Many Western experts, who based their predictions on liberal modernization theories, believed that this rapid growth would eventually fail within China's political framework.

The most popular theory in the late 20th century said that opening up the economy would eventually lead to a Western-style political democracy. But the Communist Party of China has proven these predictions wrong by strengthening its leadership and running a government that is very strong and flexible. This stability is not an accident but the result of a well-thought-out plan that combines Marxist ideas, civilizational values and strong economic growth.

First, China clearly rejects the model which is based on high energy use, high pollution and competition for resources. Instead, it has moved toward new industrialization and high-quality development, which focus on technology and making the economy more efficient. China's current dominance in the solar, wind and electric vehicle battery industries is proof of this change. The Belt and Road Initiative, one of China's main foreign policy projects, has helped this



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move from the domestic to the international level.

Second, China does not want to follow the Cold War mentality that led to the rise of other great powers through colonization, imperialism or wars of aggression. China's deep integration into the global economy creates an interdependence that puts domestic development ahead of military conflict and uses multilateralism to ease international tensions.

Third, the way the government works creates a peaceful socialist society. This entails employing the rule of law and cultural cohesion to address social tensions, such as disparities in wealth that are frequently intensified by neoliberal frameworks.

The CPC's stability depends on how committed it is to coming up with new ideas. When the Soviet Union fell apart, scholars and pundits rushed to declare the "end of history", the superiority of the liberal model and the domino effect on other countries, especially China.

Instead of being dogmatic, the Party practices the Sincization of Marxism, which means adapting Marxist ideas to China's own conditions. This is a way to keep revolutionary ideals alive. The theory that China is still in the early stages of socialism supports this idea. This means that market mechanisms can be used to grow productive forces without giving up the ultimate goal of socialist development.

China's stability is deeply rooted in the legitimacy that stems from performance. It's a social contract where the population supports the CPC in exchange for tangible improvements in living standards. The campaign to end extreme rural poverty was a key part of this success. From 2012 to 2020, the country had lifted almost 100 million people out of poverty through the hard work of millions of Party cadres.

Also, the system shows that institutions can adapt. China uses a unique mix of political centralization in Beijing and administrative decentralization at the local level. This learning organization approach makes it possible to choose the best people for the job based on their skills and to use grid manage-

ment to get resources moving during emergencies.

China has taken the initiative to change the meaning of democracy by offering a people-centered approach as an alternative to the Western procedural democracy. This model combines elections, consultations and oversight into one process, using bodies to get feedback from people of different social sectors. The system also serves as a good model for the Global South.

Lastly, the civilizational aspect is a source of stability. The Party sees itself as the protector of Chinese civilization by linking Marxist ideas with traditional Confucian values like civility, integrity and harmony. This cultural connection keeps society together even when things are changing quickly.

The stability of Chinese governance is the product of a highly complex and integrated system. By successfully navigating modernization through green energy, global integration and poverty eradication, China has created a long-lasting model that redefines what it means to be a major power. In a world marked by geopolitical conflicts, climate change and unilateral sanctions, China emerges as the "adult" in the room.

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Popular Sinology bridges cultural understanding

About 500 Sinologists from around the globe gathered in Shanghai recently for the second World Conference on China Studies. The scale surprised me because 40 years ago, there were just a few dozen Sinologists scattered across, mostly, the United States, the then West Germany, the United Kingdom and other countries.

In contrast, I found out, nowadays, some 16,000 people are going to 550 institutions spread across 90 countries and regions to major in or specialize in China Studies. In my youth, the few Sinologists were mostly studying the Chinese language, history and Confucius' influence on Chinese culture and society. Nowadays, China Studies scholars are spending more time investigating Chinese modernization, as apparent from speeches and papers presented by participants at the conference in Shanghai.

All these changes showcase China's growing global influence since the launch of reform and opening-up in the late 1970s. The country is now the world's second-largest economy. What's more, its citizens' degree of satisfaction in the country's governance system is among the highest in the world.

The huge China Studies gathering reminded me of my experience while doing an American Studies course, 42 years ago, in the United States. I was attending a two-semester project specially designed for about 10 Chinese mid-career journalists and teachers. Each day, professors and local journalists came to teach us skills in news writing, interviewing, photography and copy editing. The only non-journalism course we were recommended to take was American Studies.

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I still remember how I spent an hour or so each day digesting the two-inch thick American Studies textbook that I bought from the university's bookstore at a discount. By reading and going to classes, I learned about American history, its political system and its governance structure. Before leaving for home, the National Committee on United States-China Relations sponsored us a two-week field study tour along both the East and West coasts.

We climbed up to the summit of the Empire State Building, went deep into the vault in the Federal Reserve, visited the Capitol, enjoyed the show in Williamsburg, a settlement for early immigrants. Of course, sightseeing in Hollywood and Disneyland was also a must. As a career journalist engaging in international communication, I must confess I benefited greatly from my American Studies experience. Even when I am critical of some operations undertaken by the United States, I understand where that comes from.

My American Studies experience convinced me that the growing interest in China Studies will greatly benefit communications between China and other countries and regions. Now that more scholars are turning their attention toward China, it is becoming easier for people to understand that China is not a monster as many of them had been led to believe. In fact, China's social-economic progress and the setbacks in many developed countries in the past decades are convincing many people that there are models other than those followed in the West that can provide people with freedom, security and a better life.

At international forums, some foreign scholars no longer hesitate in calling the Chinese approach to development as the "China model", a term even the Chinese are reluctant to use. Unlike some Western countries that are pushing to spread their model globally, sometimes through wars, the Chinese believe that the world should be, and is, diverse. Such a world should tolerate different civilizations, cultures, lifestyles and systems.

According to an ancient saying, "only feet know best if the shoes fit". On official occasions the Chinese are reluctant to call their development the "China model". However, they sometimes use "China's development path" or "Chinese governance model". I think China's cautiousness is rooted in its belief that it is a world of diversity and a development model should not regard others as rivals.

With China Studies gaining popularity among foreign students and scholars, I hope that communications between China and the world will improve further and that more true stories about China will be told.