

# Challenges of the Cooperation Between China and ASEAN in the Digital Belt and Road Initiative

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**Abstract:** With the rapid development of digital economy, digital economy cooperation between China and ASEAN is becoming more and more important. However, in the process of cooperation between China and ASEAN, there are also problems such as the large gap in the level of digital economy development among countries, the external challenges brought about by the great power competition, the South China Sea dispute and other problems. This paper aims to analyze the challenges faced by China and ASEAN in the development of digital Belt and Road cooperation through literature analysis and comparative methods, and tries to put forward corresponding countermeasures and suggestions to help make the bilateral cooperation of digital economy better so that the fruits of digital economy will benefit more people.

**Keywords:** China-ASEAN, digital “Belt and Road”, digital economy

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## 1. Challenges for China-ASEAN cooperation on the digital Belt and Road

Although China and ASEAN have cooperated for a long time since the last century, the joint development of digital economy is still considered as a challenge for all countries, especially in the face of some problems such as the large gap in digital economy development among the countries within ASEAN and between ASEAN and China, the lack of digital governance capability, the lack of digital talents, and the external challenges brought about by superpower games, which makes China-ASEAN digital “Belt and Road” cooperation full of challenges and uncertainties.

### 1.1 big gap in the Development of Digital Economy

As ASEAN undertakes its new digital economic transformation, China is already far ahead. China has seized the opportunity of the fourth industrial revolution and vigorously promoted the development of digital economy at home. As for global digital governance, China holds high the banner of peaceful development, adhere to the Belt and Road Initiative, and continued to deepen international cooperation on the basis of ancient Silk Road. In the context of globalization and accelerating global digital transformation, China has combined digital economy with the Belt and Road Initiative and proposed the “Digital Silk Road”, adhered to innovation-driven development, strengthened cooperation among countries along the Belt and Road in digital economy and artificial intelligence, and promoted big data, cloud computing, and the construction of smart cities, and strive to enable these countries to share the fruits of digital development. While the digital economy of China is developing rapidly, the overall digital level of ASEAN is still low, which shows that not only the development of ASEAN is unbalanced, but there is also a big gap between ASEAN and China in digital economy, and the digital governance capacity needs to be further improved.

To develop digital economy, high-quality talent is an indispensable part. Despite large populations in ASEAN, the skills and quality of the workforce in these countries are not proportional to their quantity. Indonesia, for example, has a population of more than 260 million, making it the fourth most populous country in the world, but most of the domestic workers are young but low-skilled workers, and the almost average population is concentrated in primary and secondary industries such as agriculture and manufacturing. The lack of high-quality digital talent makes it more difficult for ASEAN to digitalize, and will further limit deeper China-ASEAN cooperation in the digital economy.

### 1.2 Superpower games

In recent years, due to the rapid development of China and the accelerated rise of its international status, the United States and other Western countries have turned their sights on China, attempting to defame China. They constantly form cliques to isolate China and achieve the goal of containing China. The Indo-Pacific region is a vast region that encompasses the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and Asia, with

many countries and regions, including ASEAN. This region has great strategic importance and economic potential, and naturally, it is one of the key areas of focus for the United States on a global scale. Since 2019, through a series of strategic plans such as the “Digital Connectivity and Cyber Security Partnership” and the “ASEAN Cyber Policy Dialogue”, the United States has continuously increased its digital economy cooperation with ASEAN and its control of ASEAN, and forced ASEAN countries to accept the US digital economy rules, which makes it more difficult for ASEAN countries to develop digital economy independently, and will inevitably affect digital economy cooperation between China and ASEAN.

### **1.3 South China Sea Dispute**

Since the adoption of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1982, South China Sea dispute has become an unavoidable problem of sea supremacy. China has been actively negotiating with ASEAN on the South China Sea dispute, and both sides are well aware that this problem is the biggest obstacle to the implementation of the Maritime Silk Road and further deepening cooperation in digital economy. Resolving this dispute still requires the joint efforts of all parties. First, all countries should respect history and international law, and recognize China’s sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea. On this basis, all parties can resolve disputes through peaceful negotiations and jointly maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea. Only in this way will we clear the way for China-ASEAN to deepen cooperation in digital economy and achieve common prosperity.

## **2. Countermeasures**

China and ASEAN are important trading partners, and the two sides have broad prospects for cooperation in digital economy. By strengthening digital economy cooperation, they can promote the process of regional economic integration, and follow the global trend of digital transformation, so that they can jointly respond to global challenges and improve competitiveness and adaptability. Although there are many challenges in China-ASEAN digital economy cooperation, with a strong willingness to cooperate and common interests, the two sides can still choose to strengthen digital economy cooperation, gradually narrow the gap among ASEAN countries and between China and ASEAN, promote the construction of the digital “Belt and Road”, cooperate in cultivating high-quality modern digital talents, strengthen digital governance capabilities, enhance the discourse power of digital governance, mutual understanding and political trust, and strengthen cooperation and coordination between them.

### **2.1 Strengthen the Construction of Digital Infrastructure**

The construction of digital infrastructure is an important cornerstone of China-ASEAN cooperation in digital economy. China should give full play to its advantages as a major country of digital economy and provide economic and technical assistance to ASEAN countries, especially those that are relatively backward in digital economy, while maintaining its own development. ASEAN should strengthen the introduction of foreign investment and advanced technology, and strengthen the infrastructure for communication over a network. China can encourage advanced high-tech enterprises to open their foreign plant in ASEAN countries. On the one hand, they can make use of vast digital market in ASEAN and improve local employment, and on the other hand, they can also introduce China’s advanced digital technology and talents into ASEAN to improve the uneven development of digital economy in ASEAN.

### **2.2 Improve Digital Talent Cultivation**

Digital talents are crucial to the development of digital economy, and in the era of digital economy, the competition between countries is actually the competition of their own digital talents. The government can improve the cultivation of digital talents, introduce some relevant policies, provide support for digital talents in various aspects such as scientific research funds and tax incentives, and guide enterprises and institutions to increase investment in digital talent cultivation. China and ASEAN can work together to carry out digital education projects, encourage domestic higher education schools and institutions to organize activities such as sharing digital education resources and teacher exchanges, share scientific research results, improve academic standards through exchanges and exchanges, and promote the innovation and development of digital technology. Countries can also encourage leading high-tech enterprises to open internship programs in digital busi-

ness, provide practice and internship opportunities for digital talents, and improve the ability of relevant staff to understand and apply digital technologies through practical operation.

### **2.3 Enhance China-ASEAN Strategic and Political Mutual Trust**

China adheres a foreign policy of kindness to neighbors., and is willing to work with ASEAN countries to strengthen strategic mutual trust and benefit, deepen the digital economy cooperation between the two sides, and promote regional coordination and cooperation. Under the digital hegemony and containment and suppression of the United States and the West, China and ASEAN need to create a new regional security pattern, build a platform for regional security exchanges and cooperation, and cultivate a common security concept. They should actively participate in the formulation and improvement of international rules for digital trade, promote the formation of a more fair, reasonable and inclusive digital economy governance system and strengthen dialogue and cooperation with ASEAN and other countries. They are also supposed to promote the settlement of various disputes through peaceful negotiations, jointly respond to global challenges, and maintain the sustained and sound digital economic growth.

## **3. Conclusions**

The world today is marked by changes unseen in a century. In the post-pandemic era, countries around the world have also undertaken the digital transformation of their economies, and China and ASEAN have also followed the trend to carry out economic cooperation on the digital “Belt and Road”. Although facing issues such as the large gap in digital economy development, the external challenges brought about by superpower games and the South China Sea dispute, China and ASEAN hold a strong belief that their common interests far outweigh differences, strengthen cooperation in digital technologies and high-quality talents, and enhance strategic mutual trust and understanding. China-ASEAN digital economy development and cooperation will surely achieve transformation in the digital wave, play a more active and leading role in the regional and global digital governance system, and work together with other countries to build a digital community with a shared future.

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