

# *Counterterrorism Cooperation between China, ASEAN, and Southeast Asian Countries: Current Status, Challenges, and Future Direction*

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## *Abstract*

Though China's dialogue relations with the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) began in 1991 right after the end of the Cold War, counterterrorism cooperation between China and ASEAN and between China and ASEAN member states (AMS) only got more serious attention in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks. China collaborated with ASEAN and AMS in counterterrorism to address their common security anxieties against terrorist groups operating in China and Southeast Asia with existing linkages with each other established by al-Qaeda. The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 further encouraged China to promote counterterrorism cooperation with ASEAN and AMS, especially after some terrorist groups in China and Southeast Asia pledged their allegiance to ISIS. Using a neoliberal theory of international relations, this article examines the current status of counterterrorism cooperation between China, ASEAN, and AMS and presents their present achievements in this field. It also dissects the nature of counterterrorism

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cooperation between China, ASEAN, and AMS by discussing their existing mechanisms and current efforts. Finally, this article identifies some challenges in their counterterrorism cooperation and examines the future direction of this cooperation toward the strengthening of neighborhood diplomacy between China and ASEAN and between China and AMS.

Amid current threats of international terrorism posed by violent extremist and separatist groups worldwide, China and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) conducted the landmark joint military counterterrorism exercise in Guilin of the Guangxi Province of China on 20 November 2019. Aiming to boost ties and build China-ASEAN regional capacities against terrorism, the exercise was thus far the largest-scale land-based counterterrorism activity since the founding of the Experts' Working Group on counterterrorism in 2011 by the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting-Plus.<sup>1</sup> The holding of this type of joint military exercise is timely and relevant as China and Southeast Asian countries share common security interests in countering the virulent threats of international terrorism especially in the time of great crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, where terrorists can exploit the situation to carry their malevolent intentions.

Since ASEAN officially established its dialogue relations with China in 1991, countering international terrorism has been in the radar screen of China-ASEAN dialogue processes. Progress in China-ASEAN dialogue relations has also improved China's bilateral relations with ASEAN member states (AMS). China's relations with AMS also facilitate China-ASEAN cooperation. China's cooperation with AMS pertains to Beijing's ties with individual Southeast Asian countries constituting the ASEAN. China's relations with ASEAN refer to Beijing ties with ASEAN as an association of sovereign states. China, ASEAN, and AMS tackled counterterrorism cooperation in the context originally of combating transnational crimes and eventually of dealing with nontraditional security challenges.

Countering international terrorism took low priority in China-ASEAN cooperation in the 1990s as they focused largely on economic cooperation and cultural interactions. But the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks on the United States by al-Qaeda operatives raised the urgency for China, ASEAN, and AMS to deepen their counterterrorism