ISSUE BRIEF

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ASEAN–CHINA–GCC SUMMIT: FORGING TRILATERAL COOPERATION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

The first-ever ASEAN-China-GCC Summit was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 27 May 2025[1]. Against the backdrop of U.S. protectionism, supply chain de-risking, oil market volatility in the Middle East, and China's promotion of South-South cooperation, the Summit marked a milestone in building trilateral relations based on mutual benefit and equality[2].

The Joint Statement issued at the conclusion of the Summit addressed multiple areas, ranging from support for a rule-based trading order to a call for peaceful resolution of the Palestinian issue[3]. Its significance, however, lies in laying the foundation for a structured trilateral framework beyond traditional diplomatic formats.

ASEAN's combined GDP is USD 4 trillion[4]. The GCC, with renewed vigor after years of interstate rivalries boasts of USD 2.2 trillion[5]. China, with a GDP of USD 18.7 trillion and the world's largest export base remains the

1 'Joint Statement of The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), and The People's Republic of China (ASEAN-GCC-China Summit)', *ASEAN Main Portal*, 27 May 2025, https://asean.org/joint-statement-of-the-association-of-southeast-asian-nations-asean-the-cooperation-council-for-the-arab-states-of-the-gulf-gcc-and-the-peoples-republic-of-china-asean-gcc-china-summit/.

2 Phar Kim Beng Hamzah Luthfy, 'ASEAN-GCC-China Summit: A Civilized Vision in a Fractured World', *Asia Times*, 31 May 2025, https://asiatimes.com/2025/05/asean-gcc-china-summit-a-civilized-vision-in-a-fractured-world/.

3 'Joint Statement of The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), and The People's Republic of China (ASEAN-GCC-China Summit)'.

4 C. F. R. Editors, 'What Is ASEAN? | Council on Foreign Relations', accessed 19 August 2025, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-asean.

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leading hub for global manufacturing, trade and investment. [6] Together, the two bloc and China combines to generate more than USD 25 trillion annually.[7] This trilateral partnership has the potential to explore alternatives in the backdrop of aggressive U.S. outlook on trade-related matters.

The Summit discussions highlighted the challenges posed by the recent U.S. de-risking policies and targeting the Asian countries.[8] All the ASEAN states were hit by increased tariffs with the highest rate reaching 49% for Cambodia[9]. China was initially hit with 145% tariffs which were later reduced to 49%.[10] This disrupted supply chains. The Summit highlighted the importance of multilateralism and reduction in tariff and non-tariff barriers for mutually beneficial trading relationship among the three parties. As things stand, the trade between ASEAN and China, backed by China-ASEAN FTA, stood at approximately USD 982 billion in 2024 [11]. Whereas the China–GCC bilateral trade stood near USD 288 billion in 2024.[12] These figures indicate a large potential for scaling up trade volumes by building upon existing frameworks and advancing stalled FTA negotiations. In this context, trilateral cooperation is important for multilateralism, tariff reduction, and harmonization of non-tariff measures.[13]

On the political plane, the Summit focused on the Israel-Palestine issue, among others, and emphasized the need for dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation. It urged Israel to comply with international humanitarian law and ensure unimpeded humanitarian aid delivery. It supported the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Israel's war on Gaza and implored the UN to take measures for the complete end to Israeli occupation of all Palestinian lands.[14] This unified stance on a sensitive global issue reflected political solidarity among the trilateral partners and demonstrated a more coherent South-South alignment.

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5 kuwaitTimes, 'GCC Economy Ranks 11th Globally with $2.1 Trillion GDP - kuwaitTimes', Kuwait Times, 24 May 2025, https://kuwaittimes.com/article/28425/kuwait/other-news/gcc-economy-ranks-11th-globally-with-21-trillion-gdp/.

6 'World Bank Open Data', World Bank Open Data, accessed 19 August 2025, https://data.worldbank.org.

7 'The ASEAN–GCC–China Summit: More Symbolism than Substance', IISS, accessed 15 August 2025, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/06/the-aseangccchina-summit-more-symbolism-than-substance/.

8 'Trump Tariffs: This Is the Biggest Change to Global Trade in 100 Years', 3 April 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly1j2v4klzo.

9 'Trump's 49% Tariff on Cambodia: The World's Hardest-Hit Victim of a Flawed Trade Doctrine - The Geopolitics', accessed 17 August 2025, https://thegeopolitics.com/trumps-49-tariff-on-cambodia-the-worlds-hardest-hit-victim-of-a-flawed-trade-doctrine/.

10 Reuters, 'US-China Tariff Pause a Positive Sign – Lenovo', The Manila Times, 15 August 2025, https://www.manilatimes.net/2025/08/15/business/foreign-business/us-china-tariff-pause-a-positive-sign-lenovo/2168074.

11 'China-ASEAN Cooperation Yields Fruitful, Win-Win Results: Report', accessed 19 August 2025, https://english.news.cn/20250411/2004e3c2733740c2bfd81ce6bc487a48/c.html.

12 Friends of Socialist China, 'ASEAN, GCC and China Forge the New Golden Triangle of South-South Cooperation', *Friends of Socialist China*, 9 June 2025, https://socialistchina.org/2025/06/09/asean-gcc-and-china-forge-the-new-golden-triangle-of-south-south-cooperation/.

13 'Joint Statement of The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), and The People's Republic of China (ASEAN-GCC-China Summit)'.

14 'Joint Statement of The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), and The People's Republic of China (ASEAN-GCC-China Summit)'.

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Cultural context was also included, with the Joint Statement wherein the historical people-to-people shared by the three regions were identified as underpinnings of soft power engagement to facilitate collaboration in areas such as the youth, cultural exchanges, and tourism. In 2023, the number of Chinese and ASEAN students studying in each other/s countries totalled approximately 175,000.[15] Moreover, in the first half of 2025, over 9 million Chinese tourists have visited Dubai alone out of all the other GCC states.[16] Furthermore, in a significant step, China also announced Visa-free entry for four GCC for one year, which include: KSA, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman.[17] This measure illustrates a concrete step toward institutionalizing people-to-people exchanges within the trilateral framework.

For China in particular, the trilateral Summit showcased its leadership in guiding the 'Global South' towards a win-win model. It is also consistent with China's global initiatives such as Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). All these initiatives underscore the Chinese philosophy of equality, mutual respect, and non-interference in mutual affairs. Such an arrangement would further fortify China's status not only as the preferred economic partner to various blocs and regions, but also as a reliable actor espousing cooperative multilateralism.

This Summit also aligns with ASEAN Vision 2045, which has three main pillars. First, to establish autonomy in ASEAN affairs and balance its relations with both the U.S. and China. Second, to make ASEAN a more robust regional institution, capable of building mechanisms such as this trilateral framework. Third, to proactively engage with external partners especially in the 'Global South'.[18] Various goals of ASEAN Vision 2045 align perfectly with GCC's and China's foreign policy aims. First, the objective of economic diversification and regional as well as digital connectivity. Second, the need for enhanced cooperation within the 'Global South' and the push for the effective working of the Group of 77 composed of developing countries. Third, the imperatives of infrastructure modernization, especially in the case of GCC countries like the KSA and Qatar that aim to move away from their reliance on oil revenues.

Notwithstanding these positives, there is a long way to go before this trilateral mechanism solidifies and produces tangible outcomes. Various hurdles such as the stalled FTA between ASEAN and GCC, and between GCC and China, need to be removed before the trade can benefit all the countries. ASEAN-GCC FTA talks have been stalled since 2009. A revival was pledged in 2023 but the progress so far is limited.[19] This poses a

15 'China, ASEAN Record Closer Education Cooperation', accessed 21 August 2025, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202408/22/content_WS66c717e8c6d0868f4e8ea2aa.html.

16 'Chinese Tourists Flock to Gulf Again – and Not Only to Dubai', *AGBI*, 18 August 2025, https://www.agbi.com/analysis/tourism/2025/08/chinese-tourists-flock-to-gulf-again-and-not-only-to-dubai/.

17 Jing Lin, 'ASEAN vs GCC: Why One Embraces China, the Other Hesitates', ThinkChina - Big Reads, Opinions & Columns on China, accessed 17 August 2025, https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/asean-vs-gcc-why-one-embraces-china-other-hesitates.

18 'ASEAN Community Vision 2045 "Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN"', *ASEAN Main Portal*, 26 May 2025, https://asean.org/asean-community-vision-2045-resilient-innovative-dynamic-and-people-centred-asean/.

19 'Developing Cooperation between the GCC and ASEAN', Grc, accessed 19 August 2025, https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/128.

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significant institutional challenge. Although China-GCC FTA negotiations started in 2004, the deal is still not through. There is also a need to develop mechanisms such as joint energy transition and resilience projects, trilateral currency swap mechanisms, and joint trilateral financing banks for the implementation of the undertakings given by the three parties in the Joint Statement. The way forward requires institutionalizing these mechanisms, and potentially creating a permanent ASEAN-GCC-China Council. Creation of such mechanisms would lead to sustainability of the trilateral process and enable it to produce desired results.

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