

Constructing Stability: China's Multilateral Narrative Through the EAS and APEC Frameworks

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how China redefines its international image through the strategic use of multilateral diplomacy in the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Facing domestic economic slowdown and property risks, Beijing increasingly portrays itself as a power of *stability and predictability*, contrasting with what it depicts as Washington's erratic unilateralism. The study argues that China employs a four-layered mechanism — discourse formation, rule upgrading, agenda setting, and linkage making — to embed the language of openness and cooperation into institutional routines. Through initiatives like CAFTA 3.0 and the APEC “Connect–Innovate–Prosper” agenda, Beijing reframes supply-chain politics as governance technology rather than geopolitical rivalry. This procedural multilateralism transforms rhetoric into operational norms, generating “cooperative inertia” that normalizes engagement with China and backgrounds confrontation. Ultimately, China's strategy constitutes a calculus of de-conflictualized cooperation: by lowering the emotional intensity of competition and institutionalizing predictability, Beijing turns stability itself into a tradable economic resource and a source of soft power grounded not in values but in procedural reliability.

Keywords: Multilateral diplomacy, Narrative, Stability, East Asia Summit (EAS), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)

I. Introduction: China's Narrative of Stability and Predictability

Under the twin pressures of a slowing domestic economy and the mounting risks in the property sector, Beijing's external language has undergone a discernible shift. In the past two years, the Chinese government has increasingly portrayed itself as a major power defined by stability and predictability — a deliberate contrast to the image of the United States, whose global posture, in China's depiction, has become erratic and disruptive.

The core concern of this paper is to explore how Beijing, through two specific multilateral arenas — the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) — is transforming the language of “dialogue, development, openness, and inclusiveness” into an operational narrative and policy toolkit. Through this toolkit, China aims to stabilize external demand, maintain supply-chain connectivity, and attract renewed foreign investment into its domestic market.

At the same time, this paper argues that Beijing has consciously drawn a line of narrative contrast: China's emphasis on multilateralism, market orientation, and

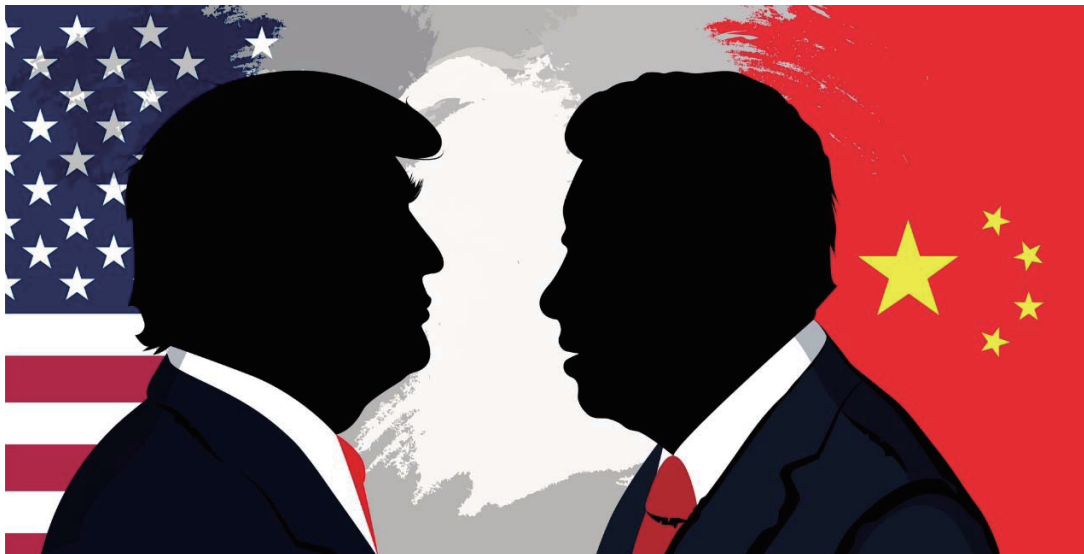


Figure 1. U.S.-China Strategic Competition

Source: Depositphotos.

regional integration stands juxtaposed against the United States' recent turn toward protectionism and economic nationalism. This contrast does not seek to deny the structural reality of U.S.-China strategic competition. Rather, it aims to de-dramatize that competition — lowering the volume of conflict — so that neighboring countries engaging with China perceive cooperation and institutionalization as Beijing's enduring commitments rather than temporary tactics.

II. From 'Dialogue–Development–Openness' to Predictable Cooperation: China's EAS Strategy

As an ASEAN-led framework encompassing the major states of East Asia, the East Asia Summit provides Beijing with a venue where cooperation can be proceduralized and embedded in predictable formats.



Figure 2. The 15th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting

Source: ASEAN, "15th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting takes place in Malaysia," July 11, 2025, *ASEAN*, <<https://asean.org/15th-east-asia-summit-foreign-ministers-meeting-takes-place-in-malaysia/>>.

A close reading of representative Chinese statements illustrates this dynamic. At the 15th EAS Foreign Ministers' Meeting, held in Kuala Lumpur on July 11, 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi foregrounded three key terms: return to dialogue, return to development, and return to openness. The political semantics of this triad were clear. By asserting that the summit should “avoid being turned into a stage for open confrontation,” Beijing invoked the founding spirit of the EAS as justification for constraining security-oriented discourse. Expanding the “securitization” of the forum, Wang suggested, was a “deviation from the original track.”

In its place, he elevated “respect, goodwill, and the enhancement of mutual trust” as expected behavioral norms. This rhetorical move not only aligned with the comfort zone of ASEAN members but also provided procedural legitimacy for China to continuously push economic and trade cooperation to the top of the EAS agenda. Over time, this sequencing — economics first, sensitive politics later — has crystallized into a recognizable discussion rhythm.¹

For this discourse to move beyond mere declaration, however, it requires institutional anchors. During the same EAS cycle, Beijing announced the completion of negotiations for a “China-ASEAN Free Trade Area 3.0” (CAFTA 3.0), explicitly framed as complementary to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In addition to tariff reduction and customs facilitation, the new 3.0 version introduced nine upgraded chapters covering the digital economy, green transition, supply-chain connectivity, technical standards mutual recognition, competition and consumer protection, and small- and medium-enterprise cooperation.

This design was intended to support regional value-chain upgrading through modernized rules. Once these rules are codified as procedures, guidelines, or mutual recognition mechanisms, cooperation acquires institutional inertia — the capacity to

1. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, “The 15th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting Held in Kuala Lumpur,” July 11, 2025, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC*, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202507/t20250714_11670202.html>.

resist the destabilizing effects of geopolitical shocks on corporate risk assessments.²

Nevertheless, one must note a structural asymmetry embedded in this framework. Many of the 3.0 agenda items fall within sectors where China already possesses considerable comparative advantages — digital infrastructure, green industries, logistics networks, and standard-setting. Thus, while the framework formally promotes mutual benefit, it also strengthens regional dependence on Chinese market access and technology ecosystems.

Simultaneously, Beijing has sought to align its global governance rhetoric with the EAS's founding spirit. In his October 2025 remarks, Premier Li Qiang reiterated respect for ASEAN centrality while declaring the need to “more firmly uphold the free trade system, build a high-standard FTA network, effectively advance regional integration, and improve the rules-based framework.”³ This deliberate alignment transforms the “Chinese approach” from an externally introduced initiative into an endogenous and compatible element of regional order, thereby lowering the political pressure associated with Chinese leadership and improving the acceptability of China's proposals within ASEAN policymaking circles.

From a demand-side perspective, most ASEAN members, particularly since the return of President Trump to the White House, face a structural dilemma: how to resist protectionist currents while keeping supply chains open and upgrading value-added capacity. Against this backdrop, the complementarity between CAFTA 3.0 and RCEP offers a dual engine for integration and growth — “using standards to drive investment, and connectivity to drive trade.”⁴ This convergence is reflected in the repeated remarks

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2. “China, ASEAN sign FTA upgrade to turbocharge high-level collaboration,” October 29, 2025, *China's Diplomacy*, <https://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2025-10/29/content_118147291.shtml>.
 3. Li Qiang, “Remarks by H.E. Li Qiang Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China at the 20th East Asia Summit,” October 27, 2025, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC*, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyjh/202510/t20251028_11742090.html>.
 4. ASEAN, “Secretary-General of ASEAN Delivers Remarks at the 5th RCEP High-Level Dialogue on Economic and Trade Cooperation,” September 17, 2025, *ASEAN*, <<https://asean.org/secretary-general-of-asean-delivers-remarks-at-the-5th-rcep-high-level-dialogue-on-economic-and-trade-cooperation>>.



Figure 3. ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn

Source: ASEAN, “At the ASEAN Headquarters/ASEAN Secretariat today, Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr. Kao Kim Hourn,” July 18, 2025, X, <<https://x.com/ASEAN/status/1946152536660209983/photo/1>>.

of ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn, who has identified both frameworks as parallel instruments for the region’s next wave of economic integration.

To sum up, both politically and economically, this convergence situates China as a plausible substitute for the United States in sustaining the logic of globalization and free trade at a time when Washington appears increasingly ambivalent toward both.

III. De-Threatening the Supply Chain and Rewriting Governance: China’s APEC Orientation

The institutional design of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) has long distinguished it from traditional security-focused organizations. Its informality and economic orientation allow the forum to bypass strategic contention and concentrate on technical, developmental, and trade-related themes. For Beijing, this attribute provides an ideal discursive space to advance a positive vocabulary of integration, connectivity, and inclusive growth — concepts that are difficult to politicize yet carry strong legitimizing power.

At the 2025 Leaders' Meeting in Gyeongju, South Korea, APEC's final declaration revolved around three guiding priorities — Connect, Innovate, Prosper. This agenda was portrayed as a continuation of the long-sought Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) pathway and a reaffirmation of regional economic integration.⁵ For Beijing, the Gyeongju summit represented an opportunity to re-normalize the language of liberalization and facilitation at a moment when the world economy was dominated by discourses of “de-risking,” “decoupling,” and “supply-chain reconfiguration.”



Figure 4. The 2025 APEC Summit

Source: Cabinet Secretariat, “20251101 Sanae Takaichi at the APEC South Korea 2025,” November 1, 2025, *Wikipedia*, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/APEC_South_Korea_2025#/media/File:20251101_Sanae_Takaichi_at_the_APEC_South_Korea_2025_\(1\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/APEC_South_Korea_2025#/media/File:20251101_Sanae_Takaichi_at_the_APEC_South_Korea_2025_(1).jpg)>.

5. Republic of Korea, “2025 APEC Leaders’ Gyeongju Declaration,” November 1, 2025, *APEC*, <<https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/leaders-declarations/2025/2025-apec-leaders--gyeongju-declaration>>.

Through sustained rhetorical engineering, Chinese representatives recast supply-chain governance as a technical project rather than a geopolitical hazard. By substituting the vocabulary of “risk” with that of “standards, mutual recognition, customs efficiency, and data governance,”⁶ China sought to de-threaten the supply-chain debate. The message was that continuity through modernization — not disruption through politicization — was the appropriate path for Asia-Pacific growth. Following are China’s six rhetorical strategies:

1. Positioning APEC as a Governance Platform

Beijing’s language did not remain at the level of declaration. It was carefully operationalized in the summit’s agenda design and in the sequencing of bilateral and mini-lateral interactions on the sidelines.

First, the agenda configuration placed four recurring themes — stable and smooth supply chains, digital intelligence, green and low-carbon transformation, and mutually beneficial sharing — at the forefront of high-level discussions. By fixing these priorities within the public agenda, Chinese negotiators ensured that business leaders and state officials alike could interpret the multilateral documents as signals of lower compliance costs and improved cross-border factor mobility. This policy signaling is central to Beijing’s economic statecraft: once the perception of predictability becomes embedded, investment follows.

Second, the structure of APEC allows for bilateral and “mini-lateral” side sessions, which Beijing used to reinforce its narrative. Within the three-day summit period, China signed or reaffirmed multiple memoranda of understanding on standards cooperation, investment facilitation, and customs harmonization.⁷ These technical accords gave substance to Beijing’s claim that multilateral symbolism and practical deal-making are mutually reinforcing — each validating the other.

6. “Full text: Remarks by Chinese President Xi Jinping at Session I of the 32nd APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting,” October 31, 2025, *China Daily*, <<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202510/31/WS69044cc6a310f735438b80b2.html>>.

7. “S. Korea, China Sign 7 Memorandums of Understanding, including Currency Swap Deal,” November 2, 2025, *KBS World*, <https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?Seq_Code=197087&lang>.



Figure 5. The 2026 APEC Will Be Held in Shenzhen

Source: Charlie fong, “China Resources Headquarters&Shenzhen Bay gymnasium in Nanshan District,” December 6, 2020, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shenzhen#/media/File:China_Resources_Headquarters&Shenzhen_Bay_gymnasium_in_Nanshan_District2020.jpg>.

Third, China transmitted a forward-looking signal of openness by announcing that Shenzhen would host the 2026 APEC summit. The choice of Shenzhen — synonymous with innovation, technology, and market reform — was itself rhetorical. It converted the abstract language of “openness and innovation” into a tangible, geographically grounded promise. The triadic linkage between city, industry, and policy rendered Beijing’s narrative empirically testable: by 2026, observers would be able to measure whether its pledges translated into observable business conditions.

2. Shifting the Frame from Market Size to Governance Reliability

At the leaders’ plenary and in his written address to the APEC CEO Summit, President Xi Jinping integrated three pillars into a unified discourse:⁸

⁸ “Full text: Remarks by Chinese President Xi Jinping at Session I of the 32nd APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting.”

- (1) safeguarding the multilateral trading system;
- (2) promoting regional economic integration; and
- (3) jointly protecting and extending industrial and supply chains.

This triad functions as a single political-economic message directed at multinational enterprises: partnership with China is no longer defined solely by the scale of its domestic market but by the governance reliability that cooperation with China purportedly offers. In industries characterized by high fixed capital and long depreciation cycles, predictability and regulatory stability are decisive variables in investment calculus. By emphasizing those factors, Beijing sought to reframe itself from a source of risk into an anchor of continuity.

Simultaneously, China orchestrated a deliberate contrast with Washington's evolving trade posture. While the United States invoked national-security logic to impose new tariffs and to scrutinize technology flows, Beijing presented itself as an advocate of anti-protectionism and shared prosperity. Phrases such as "extending the chain rather than cutting it" and "sailing together through high waves" were repeatedly inserted into public remarks, official communiqués, and media coverage.⁹ The repetition was not ornamental: it aimed to shape the psychology of corporate decision-making.

The implicit calculation is straightforward. If "decoupling" can be recoded as an exceptional, costly, and inefficient option, firms managing global production networks will naturally favor strategies of extension and redesign over those of disruption and reconstruction. In that sense, linguistic framing itself becomes a tool of economic influence.

9. Dewey Sim, "China's Xi Jinping addresses Apec with call to protect global supply chains," October 31, 2025, *SCMP*, <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3330991/chinas-xi-jinping-calls-world-leaders-join-hands-protect-supply-chains>>.

3. A Three-Act Script: Bilateral De-escalation, Multilateral Realignment, Regional Reassurance

A *Xinhua News Agency* report vividly illustrated how Beijing's APEC participation was transformed into a choreographed narrative.¹⁰ The coverage organized the three-day schedule into a continuous story arc — bilateral noise reduction, multilateral tone-setting, and regional reassurance.



Figure 6. The Trump-Xi Summit

Source: The White House, “President Donald Trump Participates in a Bilateral Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping,” October 30, 2025, *The White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/gallery/president-donald-trump-participates-in-a-bilateral-meeting-with-chinese-president-xi-jinping/>>.

10. 〈「經得起歷史檢驗的抉擇」——習近平主席出席亞太經合組織第三十二次領導人非正式會議並對韓國進行國事訪問紀實〉, November 3, 2025, *LOCPG HK*, <<http://big5.locpg.gov.cn/20251103/c92cd0aa0a97496aa4a75bd627ba2649/c.html>>.

The first act unfolded on October 30 in Busan, when Presidents Trump and Xi held their meeting on the sidelines of the APEC week. Even though the meeting produced no substantive agreements, Chinese media framed it as “constructive” and “controllable,” emphasizing a mutual willingness to communicate. This portrayal effectively lowered the temperature of bilateral tension before the multilateral sessions began. Once the subsequent APEC discussions invoked phrases such as “upholding the multilateral system,” “advancing integration through market-based means,” and “keeping supply chains unimpeded,” these statements could be interpreted not as isolated slogans but as the logical continuation of an atmosphere of restored dialogue. Chinese outlets highlighted keywords like “positive tone,” “stabilizing ballast of economic cooperation,” and “constructive momentum,” offering external corroboration for this carefully managed continuity.

The second act centered on the summit proceedings in Gyeongju. Here, the Chinese delegation’s repeated invocations — “the higher the waves, the more we sail together”; “advance the FTAAP”; “extend rather than sever chains”; “hold hands rather than let go.” — became an orchestrated refrain. This repetition performed two functions. On one hand, it resonated with the official APEC theme — Connect, Innovate, Prosper — embedding China’s phrasing within the collective narrative. On the other hand, it repositioned the concept of supply-chain governance away from the discourse of threat and toward that of technical management involving standards, customs, and data protocols.

In media space, these idioms created a deliberate counter-image to the Western metaphor of the “small yard, high fence.” If “de-risking” is equated with “decoupling,” the economic costs and efficiency losses appear intolerable; if “extending the chain” is cast as redesigning under risk awareness, the same firms perceive flexibility instead of rupture. By saturating official and mainstream media with “hand-in-hand” and “chain-extension” slogans, Beijing transformed rhetorical tropes into recognizable policy symbols — markers that business analysts could cite as evidence of policy direction.

The third act concluded with the Shenzhen announcement. On the final day of the summit, Beijing declared that China would host the 2026 APEC Leaders’ Meeting.

This decision was not a mere formality but a temporal anchor. It signaled policy continuity and agenda predictability to investors and partner governments alike. The notion that “openness, integration, and connectivity” would be evaluated at a fixed future moment endowed Beijing’s narrative with a measurable horizon. International and regional media coverage of “Shenzhen 2026” amplified the external observability of this commitment. Discussions about membership participation, event logistics, and policy themes were thereby folded into an institutional framework — a process that itself reduces the political risk premium associated with engagement in China.

4. Synchronizing Domestic and External Narratives

A subtler yet crucial dimension of Beijing’s strategy lies in the synchronization between internal planning and external messaging. The temporal alignment of the Fourth Plenum of the 20th CPC Central Committee, the formulation of the 15th Five-Year Plan, and the APEC proceedings allowed China to present a seamless continuum between domestic governance and international openness. For foreign investors and governments, this coupling conveys a dual assurance: internal planning supplies structural sustainability, while external commitments guarantee transactional predictability. Together they form the twin pillars of what Chinese officials now term “high-standard opening-up.”

The official Chinese summary of the Gyeongju meetings exemplified this text strategy. It edited the three-day schedule into a single, coherent storyline that moved from principle to practice, from bilateral to multilateral, and consistently replaced confrontational diction with collective and inclusive phrasing. Words such as “together,” “co-prosperity,” and “inclusiveness” dominated the narrative, while terms associated with competition or confrontation were largely absent. In doing so, Beijing presented cooperation as historical normalcy and relegated conflict to the background of international life.

5. Beijing Differentiates Itself from Washington

China’s differentiation from the United States does not rest on overt criticism but on grammatical contrast and agenda configuration. On one side stands Washington’s discourse of national priority, economic security, and selective openness — a

language of exceptions and exclusions. On the other stands Beijing's lexicon of "joint" endeavors: defending the WTO and the multilateral trade system, promoting the FTAAP process, and maintaining supply-chain fluidity.

Even though the Gyeongju Leaders' Declaration reflected inevitable compromises, the three shared priorities — connectivity, innovation, and prosperity — nonetheless marked an alignment with Beijing's governance vocabulary. The corresponding policy domains — customs facilitation, cross-border data flows, green transition, and inclusive growth — signaled a move toward reducing cross-border transaction costs through regulatory cooperation. That orientation embodies precisely the image-policy synthesis Beijing intends to project: a state whose international persona and domestic economic tools reinforce one another.

6. Downplaying Conflict Without Denying Difference

It is essential to clarify that Beijing's strategy does not deny the existence of strategic divergence with Washington. Instead, it seeks to minimize the salience of that divergence by reframing it as a manageable background condition.

From a political-economy standpoint, protectionism raises both visible and hidden transaction costs — tariffs, non-tariff barriers, investment screening, and technology restrictions. By contrast, the notion of "predictable cooperation" promises stability and efficiency, making it inherently more attractive to long-term capital. Hence, China consistently embeds phrases like "market-based integration," "joint defense of the multilateral system," and "extend rather than cut chains" into official speeches and documents. These are not ornamental slogans; they are designed to normalize cooperation and to background confrontation in the cognitive maps of investors and policymakers.

Xi's public articulation of "peaceful development, opposition to unilateralism, and defense of the WTO-centered multilateral order" directly echoes this strategy. It aligns China's self-positioning with the formal grammar of international institutions, enabling Beijing to appear as a custodian of global norms rather than a challenger

to them.¹¹ For the narrative to translate into tangible credibility and trading volume, however, institutional and policy continuity remain essential. Higher transparency in market access, more stable regulatory pacing, and verifiable mutual-recognition standards are necessary to lower compliance costs and reduce political-risk premiums.

Accordingly, Beijing's twin focus — deepening institutional linkage with ASEAN through CAFTA 3.0 and RCEP, and embedding “connectivity–innovation–prosperity” into APEC's structural agenda — turns the politics of supply chains into a



Figure 7. Xi Jinping Articulates a ‘Defense of the WTO-centered Multilateral Order’

Source: Depositphotos.

11. Xi Jinping, “Full text of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s written speech at APEC CEO Summit,” October 31, 2025, *The State Council, PRC*, <https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202510/31/content_WS6904a6cac6d00ca5f9a0737c.html>.

matter of governance technology. When this four-stage process — discourse → rules → agenda → linkage — accumulates across meetings and inter-agency cooperation, it may generate cooperative inertia, making regional capital and industrial networks more responsive to the vocabulary of openness and integration and less sensitive to the rhetoric of decoupling and bloc formation.

The 2025 Leaders' Declaration already provides empirical evidence of this shift. Its priorities and wording display a discernible movement from ideological confrontation toward managerial governance. The key variables now lie in the speed of implementation — how quickly individual action plans, mutual-recognition mechanisms, and private-sector adoption proceed — and in whether these technical initiatives can sustain credibility in the next APEC cycle.¹²

In sum, China's performance at the Gyeongju APEC summit demonstrates a sophisticated fusion of rhetorical consistency and institutional design. Through repetitive phrasing, procedural embedding, and agenda sequencing, Beijing has successfully reframed the notion of cooperation from an aspirational ideal into a governance routine. The emphasis on process — rules, standards, and predictability — constitutes both a discursive and a strategic innovation: it allows China to claim the mantle of responsible stakeholder while continuing to structure regional interdependence around its own economic gravitational pull.

Rather than confronting the United States head-on, Beijing deploys a subtler technique: de-dramatization. By lowering the emotional temperature of rivalry and replacing it with the technocratic language of risk management, China invites its partners — and, crucially, international capital — to treat engagement with China as the rational default. This is the essence of its “governance turn” in multilateral diplomacy: turning cooperation into normalcy and competition into background noise.

12. Republic of Korea, “2025 APEC Leaders' Gyeongju Declaration.”

IV. The Logic of China's Multilateral Image

The overarching logic that animates China's participation in the EAS and APEC can be understood as a four-layered configuration: discourse formation, rule upgrading, agenda engineering, and linkage construction. These four dimensions jointly translate Beijing's broad aspiration to appear "open and predictable" into an actionable diplomatic architecture.

(1) Discourse formation

Through the twin vocabularies — "dialogue / development / openness" in the EAS context and "extension / integration / inclusiveness" in the APEC framework — China seeks to normalize cooperation and background confrontation. The contrast with Washington's protectionist rhetoric provides the semantic foundation for this narrative differentiation. By insisting that dialogue, openness, and chain-extension are the default modes of regional engagement, Beijing symbolically assigns "confrontation" to the margins of political discourse.

(2) Rule upgrading

The China–ASEAN Free Trade Area 3.0 Version (CAFTA 3.0) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) serve as the technical embodiment of China's narrative. Digital trade, green transformation, connectivity, and competition policy are converted into executable chapters and cross-border procedures. These upgraded rules provide both legal scaffolding and compliance pathways, transforming the notion of "cooperation" into measurable institutional behavior.

(3) Agenda engineering

Within APEC, Beijing systematically reframes supply-chain governance as a technical problem of standards, certification, and data regulation rather than a security problem of national vulnerability. This re-specification moves cooperation from the realm of ideology to that of administration, turning APEC communiqués into tangible policy signals that firms can interpret when calculating transaction costs and investment risk.

(4) Linkage construction

Finally, China couples multilateral legitimacy with bilateral efficiency. The procedural gravitas of EAS and APEC provides the public stage, while side agreements, mini-lateral memoranda, and business-to-government dialogues supply the speed and depth of actual cooperation. The announcement that Shenzhen will host the 2026 APEC summit transforms this entire configuration into a forward-looking commitment — an “implementation horizon” that links today’s declarations to tomorrow’s accountability.

These four layers collectively serve two concrete economic objectives: market expansion and foreign-investment retention. As domestic demand readjusts, the accessibility and stability of external markets become Beijing’s external flywheel. In an era of “supply-chain politics,” the combination of extension and integration



Figure 8. By Lowering the Perceived Volatility of U.S.-China Relations, Beijing Increases Its Relative Appeal as a Stable Interlocutor

Source: Depositphotos.

functions as a pragmatic lever: it lowers the regional risk premium while increasing capital stickiness within China-centered production networks.

In this sense, China's multilateral diplomacy functions as an instrument of economic risk management. By embedding the language of openness into the architecture of institutions, Beijing transforms predictability itself into an economic commodity. Each summit communiqué, each upgraded rulebook, and each mutual-recognition protocol collectively reassures investors that engagement with China remains both rational and governable.

Beijing's persistent effort to de-dramatize rivalry should not be mistaken for naivety about strategic competition. Rather, it reflects a conscious decision to treat confrontation as background noise — ever-present but no longer determinative. The objective is not to eliminate competition but to dilute its emotional and symbolic charge. By lowering the perceived volatility of U.S.-China relations, Beijing increases its relative appeal as a stable interlocutor.

This de-dramatization operates through several intertwined mechanisms:

- Semantic displacement: Instead of responding directly to accusations or threats, official Chinese discourse substitutes emotionally neutral terms such as coordination, governance, and mutual benefit.
- Procedural insulation: By embedding economic cooperation within multi-layered institutions like the EAS and APEC, Beijing creates buffers that slow the transmission of political shocks into market reactions.
- Temporal anchoring: Fixed-point commitments — such as “Shenzhen 2026” — allow Beijing to project long-term stability that contrasts with the short electoral cycles and policy reversals of Western democracies.

Through these devices, rivalry remains real but de-sensationalized. China thus transforms competition into an environmental constant rather than a defining drama.

In contemporary global political economy, predictability has itself become a scarce and tradable resource. Beijing's rhetoric of “market-based integration”

and “joint defense of the multilateral system” seeks to monetize this resource by converting political calm into economic advantage. By positioning itself as the guardian of the WTO-centered order and the opponent of unilateralism, China casts its domestic governance model as compatible with, rather than hostile to, global institutional grammar.

From a Chinese perspective, the sequence of “discourse → rules → agenda → linkage” could generate what might be termed cooperative inertia. Each iteration of dialogue reinforces the procedural memory of collaboration; each rule codifies a precedent; each agenda item produces a benchmark; and each linkage builds a network effect. Over time, this institutional sedimentation can recalibrate the region’s sensitivity to competing narratives. States and firms may begin to treat “openness and integration” as the normal operating language, while perceiving “decoupling and bloc formation” as abnormal or inefficient deviations. The 2025 Gyeongju Leaders’ Declaration already manifests traces of this evolution. Its triadic priorities —



Figure 9. China’s Pursuit of a ‘Multilateral Cooperation Image’

Source: Depositphotos.

connectivity, innovation, and prosperity — translate the abstract ideal of cooperation into quantifiable governance fields: customs facilitation, cross-border data flows, green transition, and inclusive finance. Each domain can be measured, funded, and implemented. In this way, language becomes policy, and policy becomes routine.

China's pursuit of a "multilateral cooperation image" reveals a specific political-economic logic: image is treated not merely as propaganda but as infrastructure for economic interaction. The stability of that image directly affects credit ratings, investment timelines, and the discount rates applied to projects within China's economic orbit. In contrast to the confrontational dramatization often seen in Western media depictions of U.S.-China rivalry, Beijing's method is one of incremental reassurance. Each diplomatic event is staged to yield not emotional resonance but statistical confidence — predictable tariffs, transparent customs procedures, and standardized regulations. The soft power at work here is procedural rather than cultural: the power to set expectations through repetition and reliability.

This approach also redefines soft power itself. Instead of relying on attraction through values or ideology, China employs procedural persuasion — the demonstration that cooperation with China will unfold according to clear, rule-bound steps, insulated from sudden political reversals. In this respect, the EAS and APEC function as twin laboratories for China's predictability diplomacy.

Regionally, the consequence of this procedural multilateralism is a gradual re-centering of decision-making gravity toward frameworks in which China enjoys agenda-setting capacity. By populating these forums with its own terminology — dialogue, openness, extension, inclusiveness — Beijing ensures that the very grammar of cooperation carries its imprint. The resulting environment does not require overt domination; linguistic habituation suffices. Over time, other actors begin to articulate their proposals within the same semantic field, reinforcing the appearance of consensus even where underlying interests diverge.

For ASEAN members and mid-sized economies, the attraction lies in the promise of stability amid uncertainty. If the United States continues to oscillate between

engagement and retreat, China's ability to deliver continuity through multilateral procedures may become a valuable hedge. The cost, of course, is increasing structural dependence on Chinese markets and regulatory ecosystems — a dependence wrapped in the language of partnership rather than hierarchy.

V. Conclusion: The Calculus of De-Conflictualized Cooperation

Taken together, China's recent diplomatic practices in the EAS and APEC illustrate a new stage in its external strategy — one best described as the calculus of de-conflictualized cooperation. The essence of this calculus lies in transforming the perception of interaction: from confrontation to coordination, from episodic breakthrough to procedural normality.

By embedding cooperation in durable rules and recurring meetings, Beijing transforms participation itself into evidence of its indispensability. Each memorandum, each upgraded trade framework, and each announced host city reaffirms the image of China as a stabilizing presence within an uncertain world. The more this image is reproduced through practice, the harder it becomes for regional actors to imagine an Asia-Pacific order without Chinese centrality.

Ultimately, China's multilateral diplomacy is less about winning arguments than about shaping expectations. By lowering the affective intensity of rivalry and raising the procedural visibility of cooperation, Beijing inserts its preferred equation into the political economy of the region in terms of openness = predictability = investment = stability. This, in the final analysis, is the operational logic behind China's construction of a "multilateral cooperation image." It neither erases competition nor romanticizes harmony. Rather, it codifies stability as strategy — transforming discourse into architecture, architecture into habit, and habit into influence.