

Column: From observers to authors: G solidifies Asian Century

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by Lee Pei May

For decades, a handful of powers dictated the terms of global trade, security and development under the banner of multilateralism but in practice resorting to hierarchy and coercion. Disillusioned with this Western-dominated order, more in the world are finding a new vision proposed by

China's Global Governance Initiative (GGI) signals a decisive shift toward equity, fairness and free trade, where the voices of the Global South are no longer sidelined but placed at the center of international decision-making.

It is no accident that the Global South has welcomed the GGI with enthusiasm, given its five principles: sovereign equality, compliance with international law, upholding multilateralism, a people-centered approach, and a focus on real action.

For too long, sovereign equality has been merely a slogan rather than a reality and too often international law has been treated as a weapon by the powerful, not a shield for the weak. China insists that these distortions must end.

ASEAN has a central role to play in this transformation. As a grouping representing more than 650 million people, ASEAN has consistently championed multilateralism and inclusivity. Recent developments from the upgrading of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area, to the ASEAN-GCC-China Summit and the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 demonstrate how the region is advancing precisely the type of cooperation the GGI envisions. By aligning with this new governance model, ASEAN not only safeguards its relevance but also strengthens the foundations of a genuinely multipolar world.

The ASEAN-China partnership, in particular, shows what is possible when sovereign equality and mutual respect guide engagement. Rather than being directed, ASEAN states are empowered to shape outcomes. Instead of being forced to choose sides, they can cooperate on terms that respect diversity and national interests. This is the essence of the multipolar vision, a system where power is distributed rather than concentrated, and no single grouping can dominate at the expense of others.

For Malaysia, the GGI resonates deeply. Malaysia has long championed an international order grounded in fairness, law and equality. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim captured the spirit of this vision during his address at Tianjin University: "Asia was present but it was not the author. Today, it is our responsibility to ensure that the next chapter is written with Asian ink as well." The message is clear and Malaysia, like its ASEAN peers, intends not to remain a passive observer, but an active participant in the new order.

be a cornerstone of the GGI's vision.

By standing with ASEAN and cooperating with China, Malaysia strengthens both its own voice and that of the region. Practical cooperation -- ranging from free trade upgrades to regional connectivity initiatives -- delivers tangible benefits while advancing the principles of inclusivity and fairness. In this sense, Malaysia is not only defending its national interests but helping to shape the very architecture of tomorrow's world.

The road ahead will not be easy. Those who benefited most from the old order will resist change, but the momentum of history is clear. The Global South has the opportunity to move from being bystanders to authors. What remains is to write the next chapter of world history together.

Editor's note: Lee Pei May is an assistant professor at the International Islamic University Malaysia.

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