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China and ASEAN must overcome their challenges in building more railways

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CHINA'S ambition to knit Southeast Asia together through steel and speed was meant to symbolize progress — a [twenty-first-century Silk Road on rails](#). Yet across the region, the tracks tell a more complicated story. [Projects have slowed](#), debts have swelled, and some governments have quietly begun to question whether Beijing's railway diplomacy can deliver the seamless connectivity it once promised.

AI Brief

- Projects like Laos-China and Jakarta-Bandung railways reveal issues like debt, technical mismatches, and limited local benefits.
- ASEAN prefers gradual, consultative development with shared standards and financing, not China's "build now, adjust later" model.
- A proposed ASEAN-China Infrastructure Council could harmonise efforts, ensuring railways foster cooperation, not dependency.

At first, China's grand railway push — stretching from [Kunming through Laos, Thailand, and down to Singapore](#) — appeared unstoppable. It was the physical manifestation of the Belt and Road Initiative's global vision. The [Laos-China line, completed in 2021](#), was hailed as proof that high-speed integration could turn landlocked countries into land-linked economies. But even that success revealed the strains beneath the surface: mounting debt burdens, differing technical standards, and limited spill-over benefits for local industries.

Indonesia's experience has been even more sobering. The Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway — Southeast Asia's first — was once trumpeted as a milestone of Sino-Indonesian partnership. Yet cost overruns of [more than US\\$1.2 billion](#) and protracted negotiations over financing have turned it into a cautionary tale. Jakarta's move to renegotiate its debts with Chinese lenders underscores a growing awareness that "connectivity" without financial sustainability can trap rather than liberate.

For China, these setbacks are more than accounting troubles. They represent a signal failure — both literally and figuratively. Railway diplomacy was designed to signal Beijing's commitment to shared prosperity, but [inconsistent project management, limited transparency](#), and mounting local scepticism have dulled that message. Technical incompatibilities, such as mismatched rail gauges and signalling systems, make regional integration as complex as the geopolitics surrounding it.

For ASEAN, however, the lesson is not to abandon the rails but to master them. Connectivity remains the heartbeat of regional integration. Efficient rail networks could shorten supply chains, open land corridors between inland and energy security through better transport of resources.

They could also complement existing initiatives such as the [ASEAN Power Grid](#) and the Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline, turning physical linkages into the foundation of a single production and consumption space.

with ASEAN's preference for incrementalism, consultation, and national autonomy. Each member state's political cycles, bureaucratic procedures, and domestic sensitivities mean that regional projects cannot be advanced purely through bilateral deals.

What is needed is a coherent framework — an ASEAN–China Infrastructure Council, for instance — to synchronize projects, harmonize rail standards, and ensure that financing terms are transparent and sustainable. This would transform railway diplomacy from a patchwork of national ventures into a genuinely regional enterprise. It would also give ASEAN governments a stronger collective voice in negotiating with Beijing, avoiding the “[divide and build](#)” [dynamic](#) that has plagued past mega-projects.

China, for its part, must realize that its influence is no longer derived solely from the magnitude of its investments but from the credibility of its partnerships. By committing to local capacity-building, technology transfer, and open procurement, Beijing could shift perceptions from dominance to partnership. The [Belt and Road Initiative](#) needs not just grand corridors but successful stories — railways that actually connect people, markets, and opportunities rather than entrench dependency.

If the Singapore–Kunming line remains unfinished after more than two decades, it is not merely a logistical problem but a reflection of strategic hesitation. Every stalled track reminds the region that connectivity cannot thrive on ambition alone; it requires consensus, discipline, and accountability.

A stronger, greener, and more connected ASEAN will ultimately serve China's interests too. Freight that moves seamlessly from Malaysia to Myanmar, from Laos to Vietnam, strengthens the [regional market on which Chinese exports depend](#). Conversely, every delay or cost overrun erodes confidence in China's role as a dependable development partner.

The future of railway diplomacy will therefore depend on whether both sides can bridge their differences — politically, financially, and technically. As Southeast Asia positions itself between two great economic poles, it must ensure that connectivity enhances autonomy, not subordination. China, in turn, must treat the region not as a corridor to be crossed, but as a community to be engaged.

The steel tracks that crisscross ASEAN should not become symbols of unfulfilled promise. If managed wisely, they can become the arteries of a shared prosperity — one where [China's power is tempered by partnership](#) and [ASEAN's centrality](#) is reaffirmed through connectivity.

Only then will the region's railways carry more than passengers and cargo; they will carry the weight of a truly cooperative future.

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