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Beijing, ASEAN upgrade FTA

Building the biggest free trade zone among developing countries sends clear signal of safeguarding multilateralism

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China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have upgraded the protocol of their free trade agreement (FTA) to build the largest free trade zone (FTZ) among developing countries.

All domestic approvals for the upgrade were completed by Nov 13, Premier Li Keqiang said at the 21st China-ASEAN leaders' meeting in Singapore on Nov 14.

The FTZ further elevates the trade partnership between China and ASEAN members and sends a clear signal of safeguarding multilateralism and free trade, the premier said.

The event was co-chaired by Li and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, and it is one of the annual meetings between the regional bloc and six other major countries.

"We have to tear down unreasonable trade barriers to achieve the goal of \$1 trillion in bilateral trade between China and ASEAN, and \$150 billion in two-way investment in 2020," Li told leaders of the 10 member states of the regional bloc.

Earlier, on Nov 12, China and Singapore signed a protocol to upgrade the two countries' FTA, with that event witnessed by Li and the Singapore prime minister.

Documents were also signed to promote China-Singapore cooperation in fields such as customs clearance, ecology and financial technologies.



Premier Li Keqiang (third from right) poses with leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations at the ASEAN-China Summit on Nov 14 in Singapore.

EDGAR SU / REUTERS

In 2017, China-ASEAN bilateral trade hit \$514 billion, representing about 17 percent of the bloc's foreign trade. At the China-ASEAN leaders' meeting, Li called for a strengthened alignment of the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative with ASEAN Community Vision 2025, a timely conclusion to negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and further cooperation in technological innovation, smart cities and digital tourism.

Lee said ASEAN and China support a rules-based trading system and multilateralism, opening-up and connectivity. Lee said he believes the implementation of the upgraded protocol will further boost two-way trade and investment.

Meanwhile, China and ASEAN members agreed on Nov 14 to reach a code of conduct over the South China Sea as soon as possible in order to properly manage differences, expand maritime cooperation and maintain stability.

Li said the two sides have set an example of properly managing differences by fully implementing the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea to ensure stability in the region. A single draft document for consultation has been reached for the code of conduct negotiations and the first round of reviews will be completed next year, the premier said.

China is willing to work with ASEAN countries to conclude the negotiations within three years and believes countries within the region have the wisdom to ensure peace and stability in the South China Sea, Li said.

The China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Vision 2030 was adopted at the meeting, along with a declaration on cooperation in innovation. The two sides agreed to designate next year as the year for media exchanges.

China has made remarkable progress in the 40 years since it adopted reform and opening-up, and has been the largest single contributor to the global economy since the 2008 global financial crisis, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said before Li's speech.

Li calls for conclusion of RCEP talks

Premier says China will work with other nations to finalize a free trade pact based on mutual benefit

By **HU YONGQI**

China hopes to finalize negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2019 to reach a high-level and mutually beneficial free trade pact, Premier Li Keqiang said on Nov 13 in Singapore.

The RCEP, which covers nearly half the world's population and one-third of global trade, has made substantial progress in its negotiations this year, Li told about 500 partici-

pants at the 44th Singapore Lecture in the city-state.

The mechanism is based on World Trade Organization rules and is beneficial to regional economic integration, and China will work with other countries to conclude the negotiations based on mutual benefit, Li said.

The global economy and geopolitical conditions are facing complexity and increasing uncertainty, and peace and poverty relief efforts on the world stage have benefited from multilateralism, the rules-based

international order and free trade, Li said.

He urged firm adherence to multilateralism and resorting to dialogue to peacefully resolve differences and conflicts under the principles of mutual respect, win-win cooperation and equality for all countries.

China advocates free trade and also fair trade, the premier said. Problems arising from globalization and free trade should be treated in the perspective of long-term development and solved with further reforms and

adjustments. However, fundamental rules of multilateralism and free trade should not be violated, he said.

Li reiterated that China will open its door even wider and welcomes Singapore and other member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to expand their investments in the world's second-largest economy.

China has made remarkable progress in the 40 years since it adopted reform and opening-up, and has been the largest single contributor

to the global economy since the 2008 global financial crisis, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said before Li's speech.

Teo said many Chinese companies go abroad to seek new markets, and the country is influential in global development. He said escalating protectionism poses a threat to the multilateral trading system, but China and Singapore enjoy close cooperation and are building a new international land-sea corridor, linking western China and Southeast Asia.