

CHINA HOSTS ASEAN FOREIGN MINISTERS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: South-East Asia, ASEAN and India

Upgrading ties: China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi will be holding bilateral meetings with the visiting Ministers. AFP/FILEWANG ZHAO

China is hosting Foreign Ministers from the 10 ASEAN countries on Monday and Tuesday, with Beijing pushing for closer economic cooperation and aligning COVID-19 recovery efforts even as it looks to push back against the recent regional outreach of the Quad grouping.

Chinese officials have in recent weeks stepped up criticism of the Quad — the informal India, Australia, Japan and the United States grouping — and of Washington in particular. During recent visits to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, China's Defence Minister called on both countries to reject "military alliances" — a term that some Beijing are using to describe the Quad, but a label that the group rejects.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said in a statement the China-ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting, in the city of Chongqing, would mark the 30-year anniversary of relations and also "focus on combating COVID-19, promoting economic recovery, [and] better dovetail[ing] strategic plans." A vaccine passport connecting China and ASEAN countries is also being discussed.

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi will hold bilateral meetings with all the visiting Ministers, and also chair a meeting of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

Economic cooperation

Deepening economic cooperation, particularly following the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade deal, would be China's focus, analysts in Beijing said, even as it grapples with disputes over the South China Sea. Recently, China and the Philippines have clashed over the presence of Chinese vessels near a disputed reef, while Malaysia alleged the intrusion of 16 Chinese aircraft into its airspace.

The Communist Party-run *Global Times* on Monday blamed the U.S. for those tensions rather than China's moves that prompted the protests from the Philippines and Malaysia. Countries "see clearly that quarrels on South China Sea are not the biggest threat to regional stability; it is the U.S., whose warships frequently sail through the sensitive waters and try to force ASEAN countries take sides to confront China," the newspaper wrote.

After the first Quad leaders' summit held in March and the announcement of a regional vaccine initiative, many Chinese analysts framed ASEAN as a key space where Chinese and Quad initiatives may rub up against each other.

China "cannot rule out the possibilities that Quad members will further rope in ASEAN members to counter China as Southeast Asia is of great significance to the U.S.' Indo-Pacific Strategy," wrote Yuan Zheng, senior fellow of the Institute of American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. "Yet ASEAN will not easily take sides."

The framing of the Quad as "an Asian NATO" by Beijing has been criticised by the group's members. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in April described the using of words

such as “Asian NATO” as “a mind game which people are playing”.

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