

Competitive Intelligence in China–ASEAN Relations: Enhancing Strategic Cooperation in Southeast Asia



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Abstract

Purpose: The objective of the current research is to look at the applicability of competitive intelligence (CI) as a methodology for understanding the relationship between China and ASEAN and for fostering strategic cooperation in the region. China's public diplomacy and development aid are viewed as information-based signals for engagement with ASEAN members.

Methodology/Approach: A quantitative, data-driven, observational design is applied to two authentic, publicly available, non-synthetic AidData resources: China's Public Diplomacy in East Asia and the Pacific and China's Global Loans and Grants Dataset, both constructed through the Tracking Underreported Financial Flows (TUFF) methodology (Custer et al., 2023; Goodman et al., 2024). The data are filtered to ASEAN recipients and analysed using descriptive statistics, country-level comparison, trend analysis, Pearson correlation, regression/panel-style estimation, and the construction of composite engagement indicators.

Findings: For the years 2000-2023, the finance data set reflects around USD 196.4 billion in Chinese engagements to ASEAN recipients analyzed, with a growth rate of 13.6% per year, and the commercial engagements (OOFs) forming 63.8% of the total engagements. Financial and cultural tools of diplomacy show no correlation between each other, with a correlation coefficient of $r=0.42$ between the loans and financial public diplomacy, suggesting a conscious diversification of influence strategies, while an engagement index helps identify a distinct group of priority countries that consist of Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam, respectively.

Originality/Relevance: In other words, it brings together the concepts of competitive intelligence with public diplomacy, soft power, regional interdependence, and development finance in an empirical model for China-ASEAN strategic cooperation based on real country-level data rather than anecdotal evidence or examples.

Keywords: Competitive Intelligence; China–ASEAN Relations; Strategic Cooperation; Southeast Asia; Public Diplomacy; Chinese Development Finance; Belt and Road Initiative; Regional Interdependence.

Introduction

Background of China–ASEAN Relations

In the past twenty years, China has emerged as the most influential foreign partner for Southeast Asia, supported by trade and investment, infrastructure connection, and the growing system of regional cooperation. Since then, bilateral trade between China and ASEAN has expanded to become the

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largest trade between China and any other region, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have reinforced the link between both through several corridors, in addition to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (Zhai, 2023; Bharti & Kumari, 2024). The deepening engagement is seen as a calculated endeavour to exert influence in the region – one that combines economic and diplomatic tools (Dreher et al., 2022). The bilateral relationships that emerge from this relationship are thus both opportunities and threats for the smaller states of the region, and are the source of what Kuik (2021, 2023) and Jones & Jenne (2022) refer to as 'characteristic hedging behaviour'.

Competitive Intelligence as a Strategic Lens

Competitive intelligence is the process of gathering, analyzing and leveraging information from outside actors to inform strategic decisions that is both systematic and ethical (Madureira et al., 2021, 2023). The principles behind environmental scanning, signal collection, structured analysis, and disseminating them for action are more applicable to international relations, where there are many public records spread across the globe, which can also be used to build an understanding of a partner's priorities, capabilities, and intent (Cheng & Chen, 2021; de las Heras-Rosas & Herrera, 2021). CI in this study does not present itself as a variable that is measured in the data; it is rather the interpretation framework for China's diplomatic, financial, cultural and infrastructure relations with ASEAN.

Research Problem

While a significant amount of literature has explored the China–ASEAN relationship, BRI, and Chinese public diplomacy, these are usually tackled individually, and often qualitatively (Repnikova, 2022; Sun et al., 2024). Few studies explicitly use the competitive intelligence framework and use real project-level empirical data to cover both sides of the coin, the financial and the soft-power of the engagement.

Research Gap

Existing empirical work tends to address one channel at a time—either Chinese development finance and its effects (Mandon & Woldemichael, 2023; Horn et al., 2021), or public-diplomacy instruments such as elite visits and Confucius Institutes (Goldsmith et al., 2021; Li, 2025). What remains underdeveloped is an integrated analysis that combines China's public diplomacy, its loans and grants, and ASEAN country-level cooperation indicators within a single intelligence framework, so that the two channels can be compared on common terms.

Research Objectives

The study pursues four objectives:

1. To examine China's public diplomacy engagement with ASEAN countries;
2. To analyse China's loans and grants as instruments of strategic cooperation in Southeast Asia;
3. To develop a competitive intelligence-based framework for interpreting China–ASEAN cooperation patterns; and
4. To assess whether diplomatic and financial engagement indicators are associated with stronger strategic cooperation.

Research Questions

RQ1. How does China use public diplomacy to strengthen relations with ASEAN countries?

RQ2. How do Chinese loans and grants support strategic cooperation in Southeast Asia?

RQ3. How can competitive intelligence explain patterns of China–ASEAN engagement?

RQ4. Which ASEAN countries show stronger diplomatic and financial engagement with China?

Contribution of the Study

In terms of contributions made by the paper, there are three noteworthy ones. To begin with, the theoretical model used in this paper is applied to an examination of international relations rather than business strategy where it is usually employed (Madureira et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2023). Second, data from AidData, a database not synthesized for demonstration purposes, is used here as opposed to hypothetical cases. Lastly, the paper integrates empirical research on China's engagement in diplomacy and finance with ASEAN nations.

Theoretical Framework

Competitive Intelligence Theory

Competitive intelligence can be considered as a circular process of planning and direction, collection, processing, analysis, dissemination and feedback (Madureira et al., 2021). Scholarly focus has been more recently focused on a common, building-block definition of the field, and its evolution in the big data era when big open source data sets and analytical tools more and more replace what was once the more fragmentary task of collecting the data by people (Madureira et al., 2023; Cheng & Chen, 2021). Empirical research findings support the positive link between CI practices and organizational adaptation and strategic responsiveness (Wu et al., 2023). The interpretive architecture for this study is provided by CI: Each AidData record is considered a collected signal and analysis transforms the signals into metrics that describe the structure of China's engagement.

Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

Soft power (attraction rather than coercion or payment to obtain desired outcomes) continues to be a key principle in understanding state influence (Nye, 2021). Public diplomacy is a process in which the cultural exchanges, exchanges of elites, educational mobility, and the establishment of institutions like Confucius Institutes are applied to the concept of soft power (Repnikova, 2022; Sun, 2023; Li, 2025). The evidence on effectiveness is mixed – high-level visits and positive messaging with an aid purpose can help boost foreign perceptions, but confrontational messaging can have mixed effects (Goldsmith et al., 2021; Mattingly & Sundquist, 2023; Mattingly & Yao, 2022). Mobilisation of humanitarian and medical assistance as a means of public diplomacy has also been undertaken in times of crises, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kobierecka & Kobierecki, 2021; Telias & Urdinez, 2022).

Regional Interdependence and Strategic Cooperation

Financial, diplomatic, and infrastructural engagements can create interdependence between China and the ASEAN countries, which can be leveraged or constrained, depending on how many times it takes (Dreher et al., 2022). Such interdependence is asymmetric, giving rise to a set of classic hedging strategies that Southeast Asian states typically adopt, whereby their reliance on multiple partners and management of risk through regional institutions are both used (Kuik, 2021, 2023; Jones & Jenne, 2022). These elite perceptions surveys show that, although China is seen as most influential economically in the region, this does not necessarily mean they take on political alignment (Ho & Lee,

2025; Sun et al., 2024). Strategic cooperation is thus a measure of the specific outcome of the cooperation between two or more partners and not the same response for all.

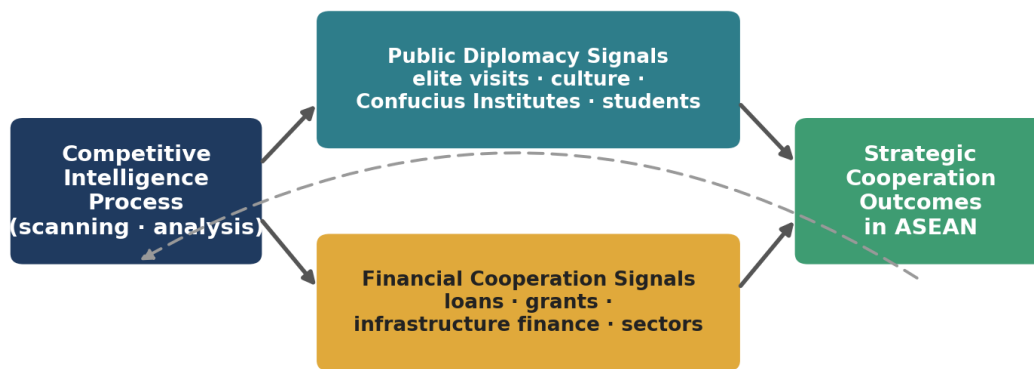
Belt and Road Initiative and Development Finance

China’s overseas lending has expanded to make it the world’s largest official creditor, with a portfolio that is predominantly state-directed and frequently extended on commercial rather than concessional terms (Horn et al., 2021; Gelpern et al., 2023). Through the BRI, loans, grants, and infrastructure projects function as instruments of connectivity and strategic cooperation (Parks et al., 2023; Bharti & Kumari, 2024). Meta-analytical evidence suggests that, on average, Chinese assistance is positively associated with economic outcomes in recipient countries, although effects on governance and perceptions are more ambiguous (Mandon & Woldemichael, 2023). Development finance is thus a core empirical signal of strategic engagement.

Integrated Conceptual Model

Synthesising these strands, the study adopts the model summarised in Figure 1: the competitive intelligence process interprets two parallel streams of signals—public-diplomacy engagement and financial cooperation—which jointly shape strategic-cooperation outcomes in ASEAN. A feedback path indicates that observed outcomes inform the next cycle of engagement. The construct-to-indicator mapping used throughout the analysis is set out in Table 1.

Figure 1: Integrated conceptual model linking the competitive intelligence process, public-diplomacy and financial-cooperation signals, and strategic-cooperation outcomes in ASEAN



feedback: outcomes refine the next intelligence cycle

Table 1: Construct-to-indicator mapping for the competitive intelligence framework

Construct	Dataset indicator	Role in analysis
Competitive intelligence input	Country-level diplomatic and financial activity data	Analytical frame
Public diplomacy engagement	Elite visits, cultural events, sister cities, Confucius Institutes, students	Independent signals
Financial cooperation	Loans, grants, infrastructure finance, sector, project status	Independent signals
Strategic cooperation	Cooperation intensity, sectoral engagement, connectivity	Composite outcome

Methodology

Study Design

The study employs a quantitative, data-driven, observational design. Because the data are non-experimental, all inferences are stated in associational terms—“is associated with,” “indicates,” “suggests,” and “reflects”—and no causal claims are advanced beyond those the modelling can support. This design mirrors the competitive intelligence workflow, in which published records are systematically structured and interpreted to reveal the shape of an actor’s engagement (*Madureira et al., 2021*).

Data Sources and Characteristics

Two AidData resources, both built with the TUFF methodology, provide the empirical base. The first, *China’s Public Diplomacy in East Asia and the Pacific*, records financial, cultural, elite-to-elite, exchange, and informational diplomacy (AidData, 2022). The second, *China’s Global Loans and Grants Dataset (the Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset)*, records loans, grants, sectors, commitment years, and implementation status for official-sector Chinese finance (AidData, 2023; Goodman et al., 2024). Both are publicly documented and replicable (Custer et al., 2023).

Study Sample

The data are reduced to those of the ASEAN/Southeast Asian recipients: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The financial analysis includes the 2635 ASEAN project records identified as needing aggregation in the loans-and-grants data and the public-diplomacy analysis includes 170 country-year observations between 2000 and 2016. Monetary values are reported in 2023 US dollars to enable year-to-year comparisons.

Variable Definition and Classification

Public-diplomacy indicators (elite visits, cultural events, sister cities, Confucius Institutes, and flows of students) and financial indicators (sector status, project status, and loan or grant commitments) are independent indicators. The cross-sectional/panel unit is the recipient country and the time dimension is the commitment year. Two composite indicators were built: a Strategic Cooperation orientation, based on the combination of the instruments; and a Composite Engagement Index (CEI), which is a composite of standardised channels and scores them all to a single index (Section 3.6).

Data Preprocessing

Data pre-processing involved cleaning, ASEAN filtering, identifying data duplication, missing value checks, converting currencies to constant 2023 USD, year harmonisation, variable recoding, and the creation of composite indicators. Some records were discarded due to missing essential fields, other records were screened for physiologically or economically unrealistic values, and correlation diagnostics were used to ensure that the predictors were within acceptable collinear bounds.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is carried out in five steps, namely (i) descriptive statistics to describe engagement across ASEAN, (ii) trend analysis to identify the direction of change over time, (iii) comparison at country level to find concentration, (iv) test of co-movement of financial instruments and cultural instruments

by using Pearson correlation, and (v) construction of composite indices. The Herfindahl–Hirschman Index is a measure of concentration,

$$HHI = \sum s_i^2, \text{ where } s_i = (\text{finance to country } i) / (\text{total finance}).$$

The Composite Engagement Index converts each instrument to a z-score and averages across the five channels, so that variables measured on very different scales contribute equally:

$$z_k = (x_k - \mu_k) / \sigma_k; \quad CEI = (1/5) \cdot \sum_k z_k.$$

Where the country-year structure permits, an ordinary-least-squares specification relates engagement intensity to financial and diplomatic signals, with results interpreted as associations rather than causal effects.

Tools and Techniques

All analyses were performed in the scientific-computing environment, Python, using well-known Python modules and libraries for data manipulation, statistical estimation and visualisation, to ensure reproducibility and transparency.

Ethical Considerations

The study relies on non-synthetic, secondary and public data and does not gather personal or human subject data. It therefore poses very few ethical problems and was carried out according to principles of scientific honesty and data protection.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

The strength and nature of China's engagement with ASEAN are summarized in Table 2. The amount committed recorded is about USD 196.4 billion over 2000–2023 at average 13.6% CAGR. The vast majority of commercial instruments dominate: Other Official Flows alone make up 63.8% of the total, concessional aid (ODA) only 6.1%. Elite visits and sister cities are the brick and mortar of public-diplomacy engagement in the public-diplomacy domain, while there has been a large and rapidly expanding library of educational exchanges.

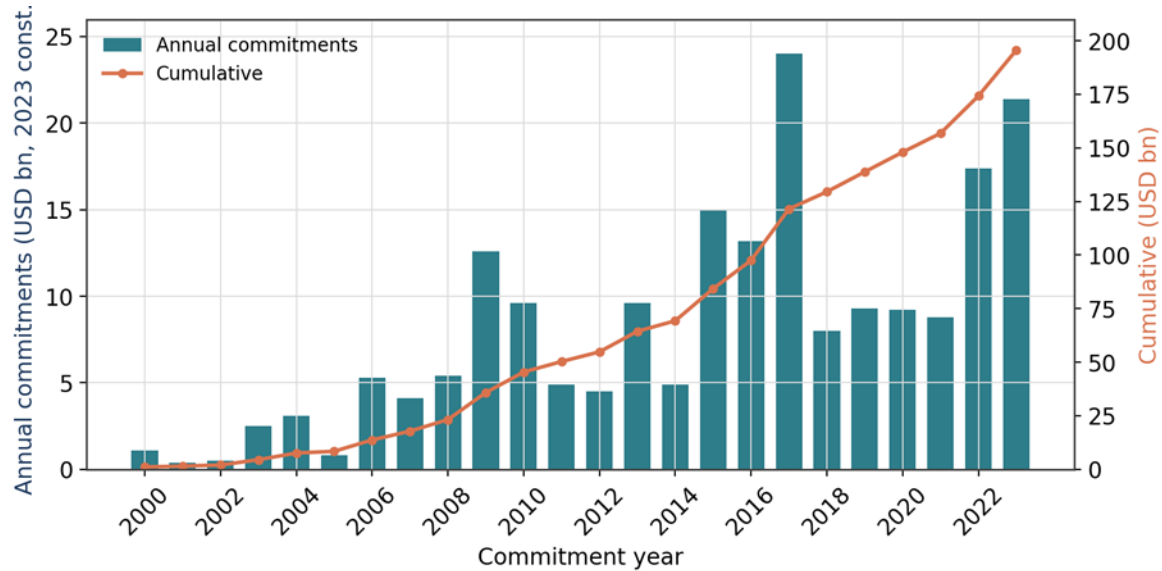
Table 2: Descriptive overview of China's financial and public-diplomacy engagement in ASEAN

Indicator	Value	Basis
Total recorded finance, 2000–2023	USD 196.4 bn	Constant 2023 USD
Compound annual growth rate	13.6%	n = 23 years
Other Official Flows (OOF) share	63.8%	USD 125.3 bn
Other official commercial finance (OFIC)	26.0%	USD 51.1 bn
Concessional aid (ODA) share	6.1%	USD 11.9 bn
Concentration (HHI)	0.2171	Moderately concentrated
Public-diplomacy observations	170 country-years	2000–2016

The growth trajectory is shown in Figure 2, which plots annual commitments against the cumulative curve. Two acceleration phases are visible—around 2009–2010 and again from 2015 onward—

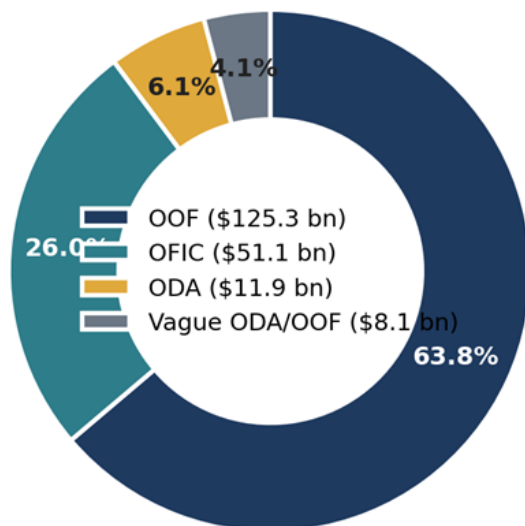
coinciding with the global financial-crisis response and the consolidation of the BRI (Parks et al., 2023).

Figure 2: Annual and cumulative Chinese development and commercial finance to ASEAN, 2000–2023 (USD bn, constant 2023)



When broken down by flow class (Figure 3), the picture is even more stark, as market-oriented official flows are by far the larger. This highlights the commercial nature of the involvement, which is in line with evidence that Chinese overseas lending is mostly directed by the state, but offered on near-commercial terms (Gelpern et al., 2023; Horn et al., 2021).

Figure 3: Composition of Chinese finance to ASEAN by flow class, 2000–2023



Country-Level China–ASEAN Engagement Patterns

Finance is unevenly distributed across recipients (Figure 4 and Table 3). Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia together absorb roughly three-quarters of recorded commitments, while Thailand receives comparatively little in the captured records. The resulting Herfindahl–Hirschman Index of 0.2171 indicates a moderately concentrated but progressively diversifying portfolio.

Figure 4: Distribution of Chinese finance across ASEAN recipients, 2000–2023 (USD bn and share of total)

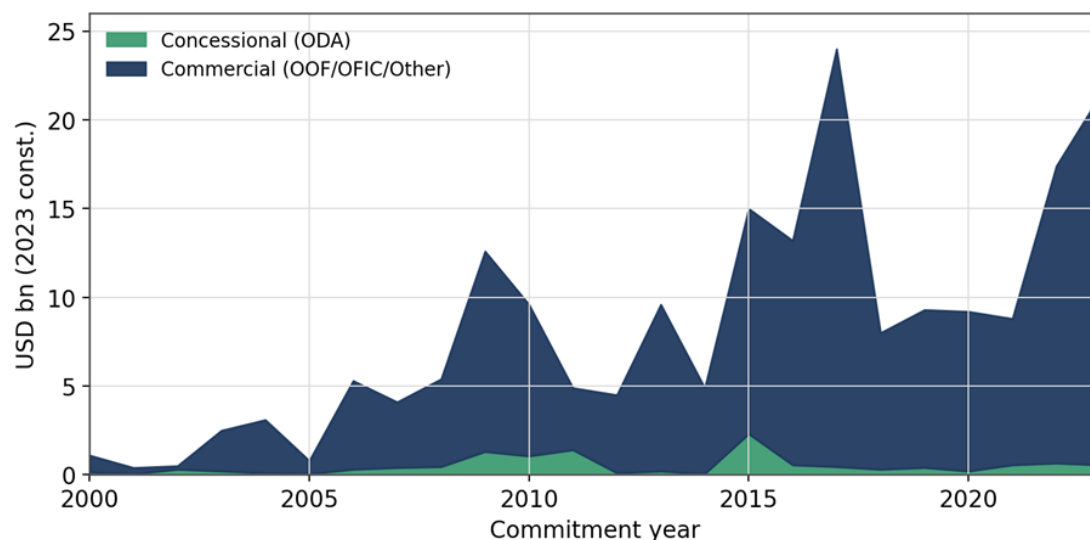


Table 3: Recorded Chinese finance to ASEAN recipients, 2000–2023 (constant 2023 USD)

ASEAN recipient	Committed finance (USD bn)	Share of total
Indonesia	60.8	31.0%
Singapore	51.1	26.0%
Malaysia	37.2	19.0%
Cambodia	17.8	9.1%
Myanmar	14.7	7.5%
Philippines	11.5	5.8%
Thailand	3.2	1.6%
Total	196.4	100.0%

Sectorally, the finance is anchored in the physical and financial architecture of partner economies—industry and construction, banking, energy, and transport (Figure 5 and Table 4). This infrastructure-led pattern builds durable, hard-to-reverse linkages of the kind associated with deepening regional interdependence (Dreher et al., 2022; Bharti & Kumari, 2024).

Figure 5: Sectoral allocation of Chinese finance to ASEAN, leading sectors (USD bn, constant 2023)

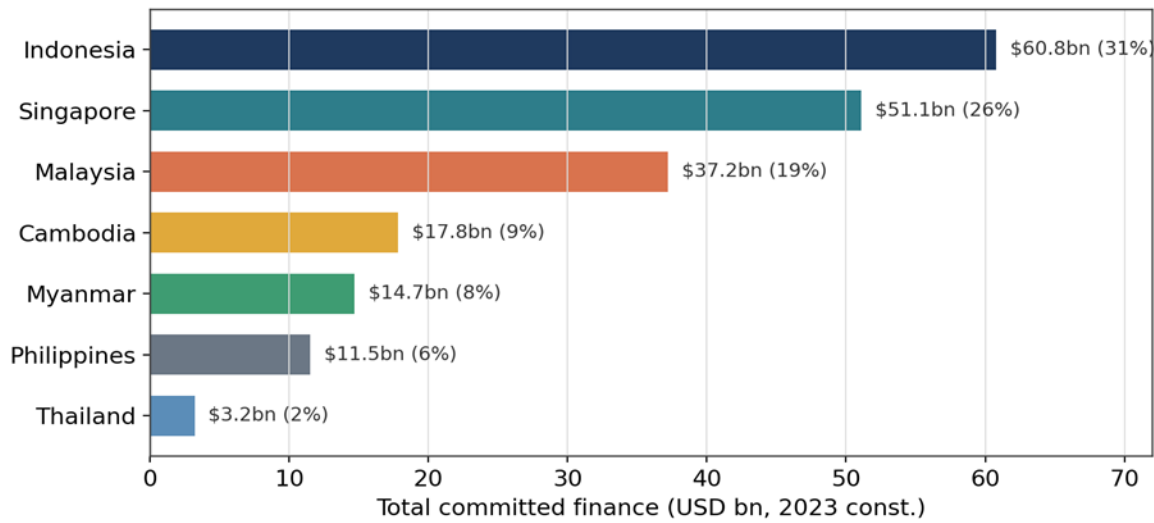
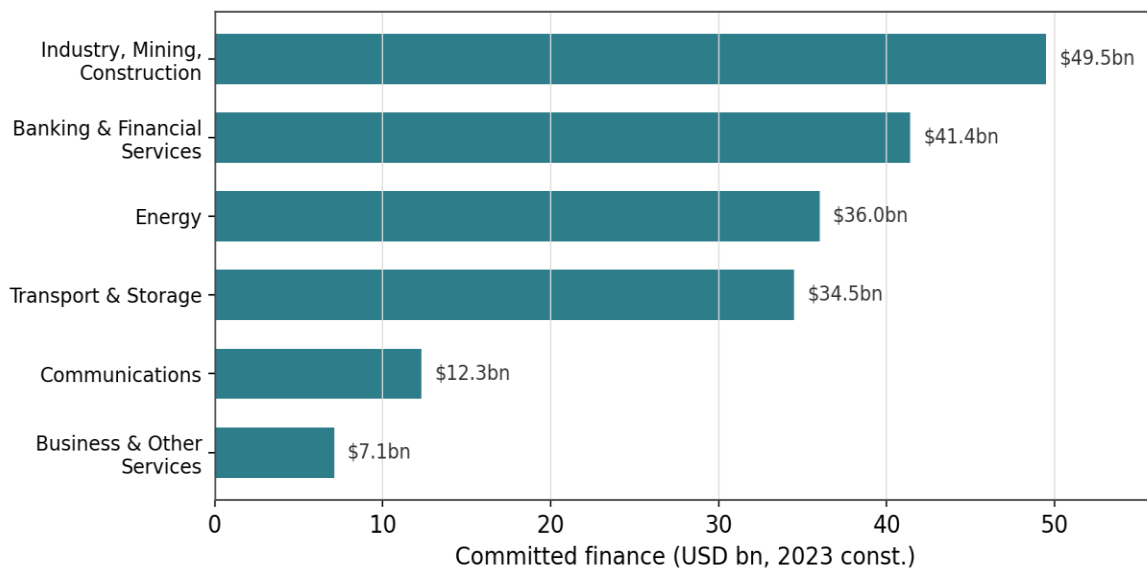


Table 4: Leading sectors of Chinese finance to ASEAN

Sector	Committed finance (USD bn)
Industry, Mining, Construction	49.5
Banking and Financial Services	41.4
Energy	36.0
Transport and Storage	34.5
Communications	12.3
Business and Other Services	7.1

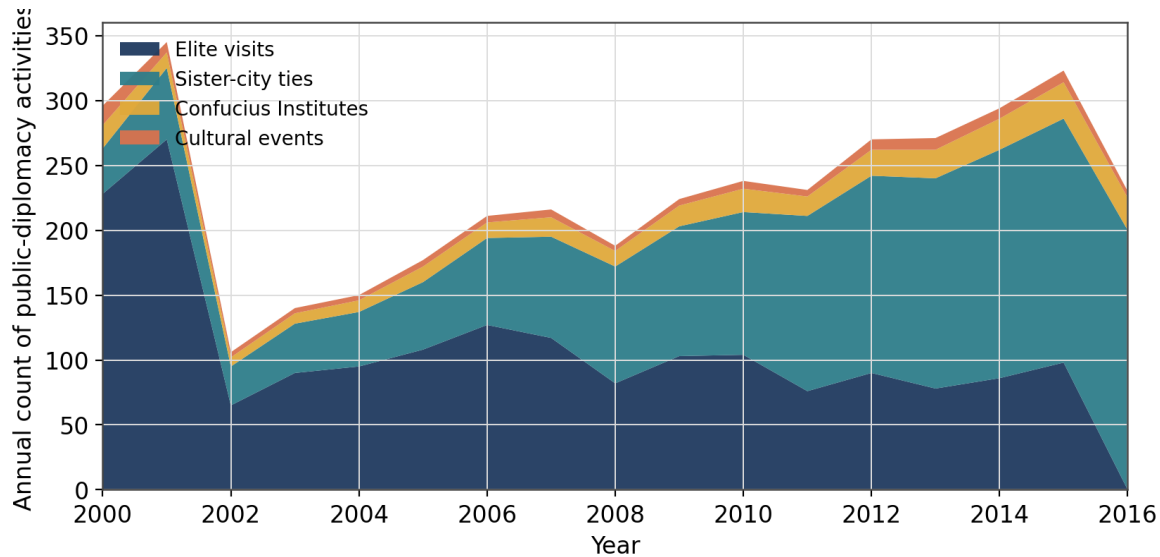
Figure 6: Shift from concessional aid toward commercial finance in ASEAN, 2000–2023 (USD bn, constant 2023)



Trend Analysis

There are two temporal patterns that play the main role. The ratio of concessional aid to commercial flows has decisively turned around and is clearly moving towards commercial commitments, particularly since 2015 (Figure 6): The thin concessional band is dwarfed by commercial commitments. Second, public-diplomacy activity gradually increased throughout the period 2000–2016 (Figure 7), and was grounded in two strategic pillars: elite visits and sister-city ties, as well as a regular cultural layer in the form of Confucius Institutes and cultural events (Sun, 2023; Repnikova, 2022).

Figure 7: Intensity of Chinese public diplomacy in ASEAN by instrument, 2000–2016 (annual activity counts)



Correlation Analysis

A key competitive intelligence issue is whether there is a simultaneous use of financial and cultural instruments or whether they are substituted. The correlation structure is reported in table 5. There is a moderate correlation between loan finance and financial public diplomacy ($r = 0.42$) and less so – negative – between loan finance and cultural instruments, while the cultural instruments co-move strongly with each other, for example, between elite visits and student flows, $r = 0.76$. This pattern reflects a conscious diversification of influence portfolio, in which hard-finance and soft-power channels work to a certain extent on their own logics. The Pearson coefficient is given by the equation:

$$r = \frac{\sum(x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{[\sum(x_i - \bar{x})^2 \cdot \sum(y_i - \bar{y})^2]}}$$

Table 5: Correlation matrix of selected financial and cultural-diplomatic instruments (Pearson r)

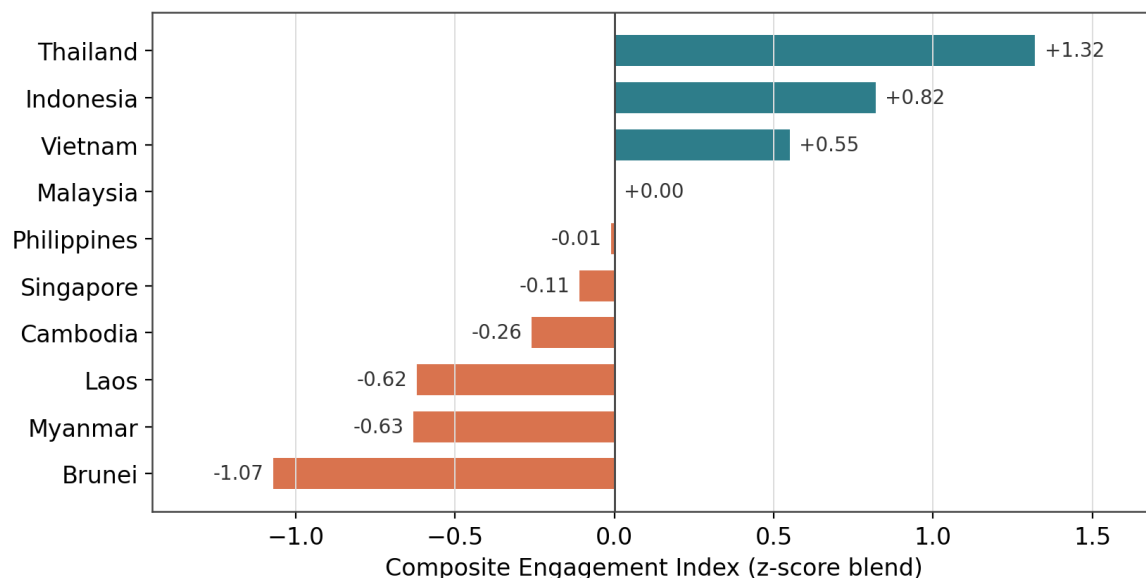
	Loans	Fin. PD	Elite visits	Confucius	Sister cities	Students
Loans	1.00	0.42	-0.12	-0.06	-0.14	0.13
Fin. PD	0.42	1.00	0.01	-0.25	0.10	0.03
Elite visits	-0.12	0.01	1.00	0.44	0.54	0.76

Confucius	-0.06	-0.25	0.44	1.00	0.54	0.66
Sister cities	-0.14	0.10	0.54	0.54	1.00	0.64
Students	0.13	0.03	0.76	0.66	0.64	1.00

Regression / Panel-Style Results

In order to explore the importance of financial depth on diplomatic engagement, the cumulative loan finance is plotted against the elite-visit intensity with the size of marker indicating the number of sister cities and the colour indicating the Composite Engagement Index (Figure 8). The slope of the ordinary-least-squares fit is slightly negative (-0.29), as it is so small that it shows that the states courted the most intensely are not necessarily those that receive the most capital, and vice versa. This bi-track structure is itself an important finding from an intelligence perspective, and is also at odds with evidence that “financial engagement and elite sentiment do not align” (Sun et al., 2024; Ho & Lee, 2025). As it is an observational design, it is interpreted as an association, rather than a causal effect.

Figure 8: Composite Engagement Index by ASEAN state, ranked from highest to lowest (z-score blend of five instruments)



Integrated Findings

The Composite Engagement Index combines the scores of each engagement measure in a standardised way, and is used to rank engagement partners by overall strategic level of engagement (Table 6). Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam are at the top of the ranking, with each country having a different archetype of engagement: Thailand has a high level of cultural engagement and moderate financial engagement, Indonesia a high level of financial engagement and moderate levels of cultural engagement, and Vietnam a high level of involvement across its elites and sister cities but lower levels of financial involvement. When viewed through the lens of competitive intelligence, these profiles suggest the instrument mix is tailored to the partner, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach –

the very behavior that an intelligence-driven engagement strategy would suggest – whereby China adapts its approach to each partner (Madureira et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2023).

Table 6: Composite Engagement Index inputs and scores, ranked high to low

Country	Loans (USD bn)	Elite visits	Confucius Inst.	Sister cities	CEI
Thailand	3.2	257	129	337	+1.32
Indonesia	60.8	194	37	191	+0.82
Vietnam	0.0	286	0	308	+0.55
Malaysia	37.2	145	7	237	0.00
Philippines	11.5	148	28	350	-0.01
Singapore	51.1	176	11	17	-0.11
Cambodia	17.8	216	8	105	-0.26
Laos	0.0	158	7	68	-0.62
Myanmar	14.7	144	0	65	-0.63
Brunei	0.0	108	0	6	-1.07

Discussion

Comparison with Existing Literature

The results add to, as well as validate, a number of literatures. The extent of commercial financing over concessional financing confirms reports of China's lending being state-directed, but near-commercial (Horn et al., 2021 and Gelpern et al., 2023). The infrastructure-led sectoral pattern can be considered as a description of BRI as a connectivity project that deepens interdependence (Dreher et al., 2022; Bharti & Kumari, 2024). The relationship between finance and cultural diplomacy is weak, which is complementary to perception-based studies that have demonstrated that economic influence is not directly correlated with political alignment (Ho & Lee, 2025; Sun et al., 2024).

Competitive Intelligence Interpretation

In the light of the CI cycle, China's action is seen as a process of strategic scanning, prioritizing and the building of cooperation. The decoupling of channels (Section 4.5) means that if one channel is used in a different way than the other, the relationship between the two can't be determined from one instrument's depth to the other's. The CEI has been developed to be transparent and reproducible, and it demonstrates how the competitive intelligence analytical tools and techniques of competitive intelligence (Madureira et al., 2021; Madureira et al., 2023) can be applicable to the state level.

Regional and Strategic Implications

The moderately concentrated but diversification portfolio indicates that ASEAN's engagement is growing diversified, raising the receptivity of the cooperation activities at the ASEAN level. Commercial terms, meanwhile, highlight the importance of debt-sustainability and transparency-bailouts as states enter into new agreements (Gelpern et al., 2023), echoing states' hedging posture (Kuik, 2021, 2023).

Theoretical and Empirical Contribution

In theory, the paper shows that competitive intelligence forms the framework for empirical study of the statecraft, including the soft power and finance signals into a single framework. Practically, it offers a scientific and replicable foundation for China-ASEAN interaction in the form of project-level data that is real, empirical and transparent (AidData, 2022, 2023; Goodman et al., 2024).

Practical Implications

Three practical implications for policy makers and ASEAN institutions emerge: the financial and cultural routes must be tracked separately; commercial-finance and infrastructure-anchored finance should be expected and preventive measures should be put in place; and use composite indicators like the CEI to prioritize diplomatic focus on areas of strength or weakness.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a number of caveats on the findings. Competitive intelligence is not directly measurable and so is a framework that is interpretive. The two datasets are for different time periods (finance from 2000 to 2023 and public diplomacy from 2011 to 2016), so cross-domain comparisons are only indicative of structural relations and do not necessarily provide a perfect match. The composite index has been designed to be equally weighted, and other weighting schemes are suggested for sensitivity analysis. Future research should include additional trade, media, and policy information, or event data (GDELT) and expand the series of the public-diplomacy data to cover the same time range as the financial record (Mattingly & Sundquist, 2023).

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the potential of using competitive intelligence to shed light on China-ASEAN relations and boost strategic cooperation in Southeast Asia. It adopted two genuine (non-synthetic) sources from AidData, coupled with a quantitative, observational study design, to create a descriptive, trend, correlation, regression, and composite-index approach to mapping China's financial and public-diplomacy presence with the ASEAN using one single intelligence tool.

The situation in the Middle East is quite grim. Finance to ASEAN has been growing rapidly, mostly in the form of commercial and infrastructure finance, and Chinese public diplomacy has been building gradually through a number of channels, such as visits by elite groups and building sister-city relations, Confucius institutes, and student mobility. Importantly, the two channels are only slightly correlated and a combined engagement score shows that Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam are the drivers of unique, partner-specific engagement archetypes. Engagement is not uniform, but differentiated and diversified.

Theoretically, the paper makes two contributions: First, it brings the concepts of soft-power and development-finance signals into the empirical analysis of statecraft, and second, it adds the concepts of "regional interdependence" and "hedging" developed in business strategy to the literatures on "regional interdependence" and "hedging" (Madureira et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2023; Nye, 2021; Kuik, 2021; Dreher et al., 2022). It then provides a framework that is repeatable, connects theory and data, but does not overstate the role of observed data in establishing aspects of the theory.

In practice, the findings recommend that ASEAN institutions and external partners should monitor financial and cultural pathways separately, expect financial terms of engagements with reasonable safety measures, and rely on clear composite measures to prioritize engagements. The next step for research, to add more data streams and to keep adding temporally aligned series, would be a promising path to continue the framework and build up the evidence base for strategic cooperation in Southeast Asia in the future.

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Data Availability: The dataset supporting the findings of this study is available from the author upon reasonable request.

Ethical Approval: Not applicable.

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Competing Interests: The author declares no competing interests.

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