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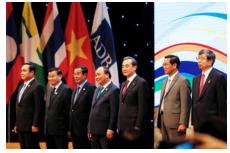# China makes its presence felt at Mekong meeting

Foreign Minister Wang Yi teams up with Cambodian leader Hun Sen

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HANOI -- China's increasing presence was felt Saturday at a meeting of leaders of six countries along the Mekong River.

During the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program summit, the leaders agreed to promote infrastructure development and speed up customs clearance procedures.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a point by saying, "GMS countries are natural partners in, and primary beneficiaries of, the Belt and Road Initiative."

The GMS countries are Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and China. China's Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, which are located along the Mekong, are participating group members.

Leaders of the Greater Mekong Subregion countries and the Asian Development Bank discussed cooperation in Hanoi on March 31. © Reuters

The Belt and Road initiative is an enormous binge on infrastructure that China wants to use to reshape the flow of trade across Asia, Africa and Europe.

During the meeting, the participants adopted the Hanoi Action Plan, covering 2018 to 2022. The plan calls for enhancing the connectivity of roads and railways, creating unified standards for agricultural products, introducing a system to help speed up customs procedures and providing electricity across borders. It envisions investment totaling $66 billion in 220 projects.

Wang expressed the importance of economic relations among GMS countries. "We need to act with a greater sense of urgency to bring to an early conclusion the RCEP negotiations," he said, referring to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. The Chinese initiative envisions a free-trade bloc that would include Japan, China, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand as well as the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

"China is committed to win-win cooperation in opening up and firmly opposes trade protectionism," Wang said. "Protectionism harms others without benefiting oneself; it is a one-way street that leads nowhere."

The comment was seen as a shot at U.S. President Donald Trump, who appears to be intent on starting a trade war with China.

In January, China expressed its intention to provide support to countries along the Mekong River and has launched a $300 million fund toward that end.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said the countries should actively take advantage of the Belt and Road Initiative and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, also led by Beijing, to promote cross-border economic exchanges.

In a Facebook post, Hun Sen said: "Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi told me at the sideline meeting of the GMS summit, in Hanoi, that China supports and wishes Hun Sen to continue to be re-elected in the near future to continue leading Cambodia to be more prosperous."

In July, Cambodia's once-every-five-years general elections roll around. Hun Sen, who is in his 33rd year in power, last year forced the Cambodia National Rescue Party, the main opposition at the time, to disband, saying its leader plotted to take over the country. The authoritarian ruler is believed to have seen the party as an election threat.

The European Union and United States have criticized Hun Sen, who has not wavered.

China has been wooing Cambodia, which has a small coastline, and landlocked Laos. It is believed to be doing so in regard to territorial disputes it has with other ASEAN countries in the South China Sea.

ASEAN has long prided itself on acting only after reaching a consensus. In 2012, though, division could be seen when ASEAN foreign ministers failed to issue a joint statement after a meeting due to Cambodian opposition.

The GMS countries began down the road to economic cooperation back in 1992, with the help of the Japan-supported Asian Development Bank. The GMS meeting on Saturday was the sixth such summit.