

ASEAN's Cooperation with the European Union – ASEM and Beyond

Yeo Lay Hwee

INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) is one of ASEAN's oldest dialogue partners. While economic ties between the two blocs have progressed steadily, and diplomatic and political relations have broadened, ASEAN's cooperation with the EU has not reached its full potential. At a more strategic level, ASEAN's main contribution to the overall relations between the EU and Asia is reflected in two of its initiatives – the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). Especially with regard to the latter, ASEM would not have gotten off the ground so quickly if not for the foundation of the longstanding ties between ASEAN and the EU (beginning with the European Economic Community [EEC] in 1972 and then the European Community [EC] in 1977). However, the cooperation between ASEAN and the EU has not always been smooth-sailing. It has had its trials and tribulations, but in looking forward, it is time to consider how the two regional organisations can truly bring about a partnership with a strategic purpose. This comes at a time when the geopolitical climate has become far more treacherous for both.

The EU and ASEAN have long been held up as examples of successful regional organisations. Whilst the regionalist impulses and the experiences of the EU and ASEAN must be understood within their historical contexts, both have played an important role in contributing to the peace and stability of their respective regions. Can they continue to play this role as they confront a far more volatile and unpredictable external environment and face internal pressures on their unity and cohesion? What can both the EU and ASEAN do in partnership that will not only bring about mutual benefits for both regions but also contribute more broadly to the support of a rules-based international order that underpins global peace and stability?

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FROM ASEAN-EC TO ASEAN-EU RELATIONS

Relations between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU) (then the European Economic Community), which date back to 1972, constitute one of the oldest group-to-group relationships. Informal dialogue took place in 1972, aimed exclusively at achieving greater market access for ASEAN's exports and a price stabilization scheme for ASEAN's primary commodities. ASEAN-EC relations were given a boost and greater political significance with the inaugural ASEAN-EC Ministerial Meeting (AEMM) in 1978 after the EC became one of ASEAN's external dialogue partners in 1977.

During the 2nd AEMM in Kuala Lumpur, the ASEAN-EC Cooperation Agreement was signed, providing the legal and institutional framework to further develop the bi-lateral ties. The main emphasis of the Agreement was on economic cooperation and development, extending the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) treatment to the contracting parties. However, despite this agreement, ASEAN until the 1980s remained at the bottom of the EC's hierarchy of relations, below even that of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) and Latin American countries.

These rather low-key relations went into an acrimonious phase over democracy and human rights issues in the 1990s with the end of the Cold War. In EU's New Asia Strategy of 1994, the EU acknowledged the longstanding relationship that it had with ASEAN and saw EU-ASEAN relations as a cornerstone of its dialogue with the broader Asian region. This more pragmatic turn to capitalize on the EU-ASEAN partnership for broader economic gains was reflected in the 11th AEMM held in Karlsruhe in September 1994. The issue over unrest in East Timor suppressed by the Indonesians was sidestepped and an EU-ASEAN Eminent Persons Group (EPG) was commissioned to develop a strategy for comprehensive EU-ASEAN relations towards the year 2000 and beyond.

Unfortunately, the recommendations in both the 1996 EPG Report on "A Strategy for a New Partnership" and the Commission's own Communication on "Creating a new dynamic in EU-ASEAN Relations" on revitalizing the EU-ASEAN ties did not have a chance to be translated into concrete measures. A series of events and a number of factors, notably the Asian Financial Crisis, the launch of what the EU saw as another inter-regional platform for cooperation, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process, and the potential enlargement of ASEAN to include Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, changed the dynamics and further impacted the EU-ASEAN relations. In particular, Myanmar's entry into ASEAN in 1997 brought new tensions and strains to the EU-ASEAN dialogue. Myanmar, ruled by the military junta then, was branded by the EU as a rogue state with a terrible human rights record, and with the EU having just developed a Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP) that had one of its objectives as promoting democracy, human rights and rule of law, Myanmar became a constant irritant in EU-ASEAN relations.

The events of 9/11 and international terrorism, the dramatic rise of China and the “re-invention” of ASEAN in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis led the EU to adopt a more pragmatic and differentiated approach towards ASEAN and its member states. The Commission’s policy paper in 2003 entitled “A new partnership with Southeast Asia” recommended that the EU adopt a pragmatic approach towards ASEAN and its member states, and forge relations at both bilateral and inter-regional levels. It acknowledged that the EU-ASEAN partnership should not be held hostage by Myanmar, as there were strong reasons for the EU to enhance its relations with ASEAN, including first and foremost the fight against international terrorism, as well as the underlying economic imperatives. These must also be understood in the context that ASEAN was then in the process of rethinking its regional cooperation model and seeking greater institutionalization as it contemplated moving towards the building of an ASEAN Community.

From 2003 the EU scaled up efforts to engage ASEAN, in particular in the area of providing support for capacity-building towards integration with programmes such as the ASEAN Programme for Regional Integration Support (APRIS) from 2003-2010 to the current ASEAN Regional Integration Support from the EU (ARISE). The EU also stepped up cooperation in counter-terrorism with several ASEAN member states, such as Indonesia, in the wake of the Bali bombing and other terrorist attacks.

In its 2006 Global Europe strategy, ASEAN was also identified as one of the priority regions for the EU’s trade and investments, and in 2007, the EU tried to pursue an ambitious EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Unfortunately, the negotiations had to be suspended in 2009 after a few rounds of negotiations. The difficulties encountered because of the huge diversities in economic structure and developments within ASEAN plus the ongoing disputes with Myanmar over its human rights record forced the EU to abandon the ambitious inter-regional FTA in favour of bilateral FTAs with individual ASEAN member states. The first ASEAN member state the EU negotiated with was Singapore. As of 2016, the EU has concluded its FTA negotiations with Singapore and Vietnam. Negotiations have also been launched with Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and, most recently, Indonesia.

Despite such efforts, EU-ASEAN relations continued to be plagued by disagreement over developments in Myanmar and how to engage the country, with ASEAN preferring constructive engagement over the EU’s imposition of sanctions. It was Myanmar’s general election in 2010 that set in motion a credible reform process and a number of other reasons that finally led the EU to truly re-examine its relations with ASEAN.

What are some of these reasons? First and foremost, the US pivot (or rebalancing) to Asia in 2011 changed the geopolitical undercurrents in the Asia-Pacific region. The contest between the US and China in Southeast Asia, and rising tensions in the South China Sea, made this region an important test case of how China will reshape

Asian security and regional governance. Second, ASEAN's efforts to build an ASEAN Economic Community with a market of over 600 million consumers were making some progress. Despite the low ambitions of the ASEAN Economic Community with the key objectives of creating a single production base, and efforts to transform ASEAN into an attractive investment destination, Southeast Asia's good growth trajectory provides opportunities for the EU in its search for new growth areas to aid its economic recovery. Taken as a single entity, ASEAN is the EU's third largest trading partner outside of Europe, after the US and China. ASEAN was also the fifth most important location of EU foreign direct investments abroad in 2014, with €184 billion in FDI stocks.¹

In May 2015, the EU issued a Joint Communication on its relations with ASEAN entitled "The EU and ASEAN: A Partnership with a Strategic Purpose". In this Communication, the EU acknowledged that "it has a strategic interest in strengthening its relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations" because "ASEAN is at the heart of the efforts to build a more robust regional security order in the wider Asia-Pacific".²

How can this partnership with a strategic purpose be achieved? It can be achieved if ASEAN and the EU first deepen their understanding of each other, and work creatively to achieve tangible results in different areas of cooperation, using these as building blocks towards more collaborative inter-regional dialogue. By identifying their common interests in the inter-regional dialogue, both the EU and ASEAN can focus and coordinate more in their cooperative efforts in other multilateral forums, such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

PARTNERSHIP WITH A STRATEGIC PURPOSE

Both ASEAN and the EU in some way face the same set of challenges – challenges to their own internal unity due to a series of crises amid rising nationalism and geopolitical tensions. While vastly different in terms of their institutional set-ups, the EU being a far more legalistic entity with supranational institutions and ASEAN being a more consensus-driven collaborative enterprise, both face the need for institutional adaptation as they grapple with internal discontents and external pressures. External pressures arising from far more competitive and complex US-Sino relations have a great chance of fracturing ASEAN, while internal discontent leading to Brexit, rise of euroscepticism and emergence of illiberal or populist leaders, have led to a much more diminished and less effective Union. Both need some affirmation of their continued relevance, and

¹ Yeo Lay Hwee. "ASEAN-EU Dialogue - Moving Towards Strategic Relevance", in *50 years of ASEAN and Singapore*, edited by Tommy Koh, Chang Li Lin and Sharon Seah (forthcoming).

² Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, "The EU and ASEAN: a partnership with a strategic purpose" (Brussels, 18 August 2015), p. 2.

the inter-regional partnership can be effectively harnessed for the EU and ASEAN to regain a sense of strategic purpose and relevance.

An unpredictable, transactional Trump-led America and China's growing power and influence challenge both the EU and ASEAN to fundamentally rethink their overall foreign policy and security strategy, and their partnership with other major players and with one another. Just as former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans called upon Australians in his recent speech to “reset its foreign policy away from a lockstep reliance on America” and asked that there be “less US, more Asia and more self-reliance”³, it is also time the EU and ASEAN re-examine their choices and approaches towards regional, inter-regional and global engagement.

In the 2016 Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini expressed the hope that this Global Strategy would lead the EU towards strategic autonomy.⁴ At the same time, ASEAN has always been an instrument for its member states to preserve their strategic autonomy. The changing geopolitical circumstances they faced required them to up their game if they were to develop and maintain such strategic autonomy to pursue their own foreign policy priorities.

Both ASEAN and the EU therefore have very good reasons to engage more strategically with each other. These can be done at different levels: EU member states with ASEAN member states, inter-regional EU-ASEAN endeavours, and EU-ASEAN efforts at multilateral forums such as ASEM and ARF. But fundamentally, the road to a fruitful and fulfilling partnership starts with an understanding of each other's interests, strengths and weaknesses.

DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING

For the EU-ASEAN partnership to truly flourish, and have a regional and global impact, a few things must happen. The most crucial is to deepen understanding of each other.

Despite 40 years of partnership, it was not until recently that the EU began to see ASEAN for what it is and not what it wishes it to be. The EU realizes that despite all the rhetoric on community building, ASEAN is not going to become like the EU in the foreseeable future. As noted by Alice Ba, cooperation within ASEAN is consensus driven, not majority rule; more collaborative and less coordinated and far more differentiated

³ Interview with Gareth Evans by Australian Broadcaster, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2017/s4653721.htm>.

⁴ “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy”, June 2016, http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf.

than homogenized.⁵ With this realization, the EU is therefore following a multi-pronged approach towards ASEAN – engaging ASEAN not only at the inter-regional level, but also increasingly being open towards engaging individual or a cluster of ASEAN states within the ASEAN or EU-ASEAN framework.⁶

Similarly, ASEAN has not made concerted efforts in understanding how the EU works except to complain about its “bureaucratic nature”. It was only in the wake of the Asian financial crisis when ASEAN was seeking to re-invent itself to redeem its loss in credibility that efforts were made to learn about the functioning of the EU. At the same time, ASEAN considered how it could move from “nationalist collaboration” to “regional governance” as it confronted serious transnational challenges, ranging from the environmental haze to financial contagion. Still, the lack of appreciation of the complexity in the EU’s decision-making structures has resulted in exasperated complaints – for instance over issues such as how many foreign ministers from EU member states turn up for EU-ASEAN meetings.

The increased trade and investments ties between the EU and ASEAN over the last four decades have so far been market-driven. By 2015, ASEAN as a whole is the EU’s third largest external trading partner (after the US and China) and the EU is ASEAN’s second largest trading partner (after China). European companies have also invested significantly in the Southeast Asian region, accounting for almost a quarter of total foreign direct investments in ASEAN in recent years, with total investment stock now standing at €153 billion. Southeast Asian companies’ investments into Europe are also growing and reached a total stock of over €57 billion in 2013.⁷

In 2006, the “Global Europe – Competing in the World” report from Directorate General for Trade of the European Commission identified ASEAN as a priority FTA partner for the EU. The key economic criteria for new FTA partners according to the EU is the market potential of the partner, the level of protection against EU export interests, and negotiations with EU competitors. The EU launched FTA negotiations with ASEAN in 2007 only to suspend it in 2009 after realizing the difficulties in negotiating a bloc-to-bloc FTA with ASEAN in view of the huge disparities in levels of economic development and other socio-political differences. It has since pursued a bilateral approach with individual ASEAN member states beginning with Singapore, and then other ASEAN member states. These bilateral FTAs between the EU and ASEAN member states will become the stepping stones towards an ambitious region-to-region FTA.

⁵ Alice D. Ba. “The Institutionalisation of Southeast Asia”, in *Institutionalising East Asia: Mapping and Reconfiguring Regional Cooperation*, edited by Alice D. Ba, Cheng-Chwee Kuik and Sueo Sudo (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 29.

⁶ Yeo Lay Hwee. “EU Strategy towards Southeast Asia and ASEAN”, in *Changing Waters: Towards a New EU Asia Strategy*, edited by Olivia Gippner (LSE IDEAS Report, 2016), p. 6.

⁷ EU Singapore Trade and Investment 2016, publication by European Commission, 2016.

Beyond trade, which is the EU's core interest, the EU has argued in recent years that it also has a strategic interest in the security of Southeast Asia as the region is at the "confluence of great powers competition between the US and China. Thus the region is the most immediate testing grounds of strains on the international order created by changing great power relations. What unfolds in Southeast Asia will ultimately shape not just Europe's security environment but the world's".⁸

For ASEAN, while it welcomes the EU putting priority on trade and investments ties with its member states, it is far less convinced of the role that the EU can play in mitigating the big powers' competition between the US and China in the region. This has led to a gap between the EU's desire to have a more prominent role in Southeast Asian security and the more dismissive attitudes that ASEAN members continue to hold. It has in turn led to the much convoluted and unnecessary tussle over the question of the EU's membership at the East Asia Summit (EAS).

The suspension of the EU-ASEAN FTA negotiations and the question over whether the EU should become a member of EAS reflected the lack of deeper understanding and appreciation between the EU and ASEAN. As the EU and ASEAN work through these differences and different expectations, knowledge and understanding of each other should deepen. Also useful to consider is perhaps the creation of a network of EU-ASEAN think tanks that can engage in Track II diplomacy, assisting to improve communications and forge a better understanding of one another's view points and perspectives, and at the same time seek to introduce new thinking and make contributions to policy learning and policy entrepreneurship.

CONVERGING INTERESTS

If both the EU and ASEAN deepened their understanding of each other, they would find that they actually face a common set of dilemmas. These include:

- Keeping economic nationalism and protectionism in check and maintaining an open global trading order while addressing the issue of discontents arising from globalisation;
- Dealing with both the opportunities and risks of cooperation with China;
- Dealing with an unpredictable and unilateral US;
- Increased risks emanating from non-traditional security issues such as climate change, large-scale migration and jihadist terrorism

⁸ Sarah Raine. *A Road Map to Strategic Relevance: EU Security Policy Options in Southeast Asia* (IISS, 2016), p. 9.

The EU is first and foremost the biggest trading bloc with an economy exceeding €14 trillion. As Dr Cecilia Malmstroem, European Commissioner for Trade, said in her speech in Singapore in March 2017, free trade is not just a slogan for Europe, “it is in our DNA since our foundation in 1957. In a troubled time for global trade, we will stand up for the prosperity and progress it promises”.⁹ ASEAN has also embarked on the journey of building an ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN economies have benefited from being open and welcoming to trade and investments. Hence, it is in the interest of both regional blocs to work together in order to counter the protectionist mood by keeping their markets open and supporting the multilateral, rules-based trading order. Both ultimately share the broad desire to ensure economic growth and development by boosting trade and investments.

The growth of China has been mesmerizing since Deng Xiaoping opened the doors of China to the outside world. The last decade in particular has seen a confident and assertive China whose power and influence are reshaping not only Asia, but the global economy and challenging the structure of the western-centric global order. The EU has up until recently looked upon the growth of China as an opportunity, and was eager to engage and integrate China within existing frameworks and structures. In 2003, China was designated as a strategic partner of the EU, signalling the intensification for the EU-China partnership to go beyond trade and investments to encompass the political and security domains. However, as China’s clout and influence grew dramatically, EU-China relations began to shift. China is no longer seen primarily as an economic opportunity without geopolitical consequences. China is in fact increasingly seen as not only posing an economic challenge to the EU’s competitiveness, but also potentially undermining the unity of the EU through its salami-slicing diplomacy and dealings with the different EU member states. Instead of being fully integrated into the western-centric global order, China is increasingly challenging this order with its own initiatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road initiative.

Similarly for ASEAN, it has since the 1990s been actively engaging China within various multilateral forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus). However, for the ASEAN countries, the confluence of history and geography presents urgent and inescapable questions on how to respond to China’s rising power and assertiveness in the region. During the Cold War era, the stability of the region was underpinned by the presence of the US. In the immediate post-Cold War era, US dominance and market-driven economic integration in the Asia-Pacific went hand in hand, allowing for the rapid development of many of the region’s economies. Now, as China increasingly seeks to extend its influence in the Asia-Pacific region, and

⁹ Report on Cecilia Malmstroem’s speech delivered at Singapore Management University, 8 March 2017 <http://www.eucentre.sg/?p=13938>.

challenge the US dominance, ASEAN countries fear that the day will come when they will be forced to choose between China and the US.

While the specific nature of the problems is not the same, both the EU and ASEAN face the dilemma of how China's assertiveness may impact the unity of the regional blocs, and how they should respond to the increased rivalry between the US and China. Both also share the same interests to ensure that the Asia-Pacific region remains stable and peaceful. The EU's trade and investments in the Asia-Pacific surpass that of the US and China.

Beyond the broad geopolitical tensions brought about by the complex Sino-US relations, the more immediate threats faced by ASEAN and the EU concern a number of soft security issues – terrorism, large-scale migration and havoc wrecked by natural disasters and climate change. All these issues present opportunities for ASEAN and the EU to develop specific cooperative projects that can become building blocks towards regional governance and improve the institutional bonds between the EU and ASEAN.

FROM STRATEGIC PURPOSE TO PRAGMATIC ACTION

For a partnership with a strategic purpose, EU-ASEAN relations need to be multi-dimensional and multi-pronged. They need to develop an overarching framework of understanding that takes into account the different worldviews and distinct priorities but at the same time encompasses common interests and concerns. Within this broad framework, differentiated, multi-layered and multi-level cooperation can be developed.

Let's look at how ASEAN cooperation with the EU can be pragmatically structured for maximum gains.

Addressing country-specific and region-specific challenges through differentiated collaboration

ASEAN is an inter-governmental organization comprising members with different political systems and at very different levels of socioeconomic development. As an organization that works by consensus between its member states, ASEAN is not a substitute for national political will, national competence and national capability. If the EU is indeed serious in gaining a strong foothold in the Southeast Asian region, it needs to engage not just at the region-to-region level, but also individual or a cluster of ASEAN members within the ASEAN or EU-ASEAN framework. To some extent, the EU has come to realize this, and in its latest Joint Communication, it acknowledges that "taking EU-ASEAN relations to the next level will build on and complement the already rich and varied bilateral ties between the EU and individual ASEAN member states", putting special priority on working with ASEAN countries in the Mekong Sub-region to reduce the intra-ASEAN development gap and to connect these countries.

Taking this more differentiated approach would allow the EU to achieve more targeted outcomes. By being attuned to the development gaps and responding to the different development priorities within ASEAN, the EU can creatively align different interests and different priorities and work with different constellations of ASEAN member states to deliver more impactful outcomes. ASEAN's ability to make an impact in turn depends on national capacities and regional unity. Confident and capable ASEAN member states equal a more effective ASEAN.

Fostering growth and development through bilateral and inter-regional trade and investments

Development and security are closely intertwined. This is particularly true for developing countries that struggle to alleviate poverty and provide decent economic opportunities for its population. Many ASEAN members are fortunately on good growth trajectories. Still, maintaining these good growth trajectories would require continued external investments and an open economic order that supports free trade.

The EU with its tremendous market power is an important economic player in the region. ASEAN is also an important growth region with untapped market potential. Other major players, in particular Japan and China, are also increasing their inroads into the ASEAN market. The EU is taking a more proactive approach towards finding economic opportunities in Southeast Asia through programmes such as “EU business avenues in Southeast Asia”. This business support programme aims to help European companies establish long-lasting collaborations in Southeast Asia through match-making and business support services.

At a higher political level, the EU is employing economic diplomacy as a tool to strengthen its long-term engagement with ASEAN. Free trade agreements have been concluded with Singapore and Vietnam, and are being negotiated with Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia. Negotiations of an investment protection agreement are also underway with Myanmar. The bilateral FTAs are conceived as building blocks towards a future bloc-to-bloc EU-ASEAN agreement. This approach reflects the EU's better understanding of the ground situation in ASEAN, and its astute use of economic diplomacy to achieve its foreign policy goals.

Navigating US-China rivalry and reaffirming multilateralism and rules-based order through the ARF

An important platform on which the EU and ASEAN can work together in facing strategic uncertainties is the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

The ARF was initiated by ASEAN in the early 1990s to ensure its own relevance in the post-Cold War era, by intensifying dialogue on political and security affairs with its external partners. The “unanticipated end of the Cold War” induced “a high degree of

unpredictability” on the security situation in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁰ The ARF was designed to provide a platform for dialogue and consultation and enmesh key players in the Asia-Pacific in a security partnership that would enhance the strategic equilibrium in the region by promoting the norms of self-restraint and the non-use of force. Its purpose is to draw all relevant players into a reciprocal web of consultations and foster habits of dialogue to create trust and confidence-building among members. As Sheldon Simon puts it, the ARF reflects ASEAN’s preferred strategy of consensus diplomacy.

The European Union as a dialogue partner of ASEAN became a member of the ARF by default, and is represented as a regional entity (and not by its member states), together with 26 other countries, from the 10 ASEAN countries to Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea), Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Korea, Timor Leste and the United States (US).

While the ARF has over the years been criticized by many as a talk shop, it remains one of the few security discussion forums in the Asia Pacific that encompass all the major powers in the Asia Pacific. From the primary objective of alleviating the strategic uncertainties in the post-Cold War security environment through dialogue, it has expanded its range of activities to facilitate cooperation in non-traditional security issues, from counter-terrorism and transnational crimes to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

As both confront the current period of strategic uncertainties arising from an unpredictable Trump-led America, an assertive China and increasing rivalries between major powers in the region, the ARF should become a platform for the EU, ASEAN and other like-minded partners such as Australia and New Zealand to reiterate the importance of a rules-based order and for supporting multilateral efforts to address potential hotspots and rising tensions.

The ARF has been supported in its functions by Track II diplomacy taking place within the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP). As noted by Kuik, such Track II multilateral dialogues have played “an instrumental role in initiating dialogues, proposing ideas, sponsoring activities and facilitating mediations, thereby contributing to confidence building and cooperation among regional countries”¹¹ CSCAP should therefore also be a platform in which the EU and ASEAN can cooperate more closely to shape the agenda towards a stable and peaceful Asia Pacific.

¹⁰ Cheng-Chwee Kuik. “Institutionalisation of security cooperation in East Asia”, in *Institutionalising East Asia: Mapping and Reconfiguring Regional Cooperation*, edited by Alice D. Ba, Cheng-Chwee Kuik and Sueo Sudo (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 84.

¹¹ Kuik, *ibid.*, p. 89.

Building Trans-continental Connectivity and Human Connectedness through ASEM

ASEAN was instrumental in getting the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) off the ground. While the idea of a summit meeting between Asian and European leaders was seeded by Singapore, it was through ASEAN, capitalizing on its historical and existing institutional links with the EU, and its dialogue partnerships with China, Japan and Korea, that a case for ASEM was constructed. ASEM was also a case of ASEAN's search for strategic relevance in a post-Cold War era. Responding to the rise of China, the fear of fortress Europe as the European Community integrated further, transforming itself into the European Union, and the concern over US unilateralism as it became the only super-power with the collapse of the Soviet Union, ASEAN sought to strengthen its relations with Europe, engage and socialize China through multilateral forums, and diversify its markets and economic relations.

ASEM's inaugural summit was held in 1996, less than two years after the idea was mooted. Originally comprising on the Asian side, then ASEAN 7 (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) plus China, Japan and South Korea, and on the European side, the European Commission and the 15 member states of the European Union, the membership of ASEM has since doubled from 26 to 53. ASEM is now an entity that is trans-continental in nature, comprising members from different subregions of Asia and Europe. When ASEM celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2016, the theme of the 11th Summit held in Ulaanbaatar was "partnership for the future through connectivity".

China has been one of the most proactive members in ASEM, which encompasses and connects countries across the Eurasian landmass. China sees the potential synergies that it could bring from its Belt and Road initiative and AIIB to the theme of connectivity in ASEM.

What can the EU and ASEAN do in order to widen the connectivity theme to benefit as many of the ASEM members as possible? The EU has called for the concept of connectivity to be widened and not only be focused on physical infrastructural connectivity. While the infrastructural needs and investments are indeed important, and a coalition of ASEM members can actively contribute to the discussions on how multilateral investments can be structured within the ASEM framework, it is also important to think of connectivity in many other arenas – ideas and institutions. In fact, ASEM has placed emphasis on people-to-people connectedness by investing in the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), the only ASEM institution set up a year after the first ASEM was held.

Remaining open and connected – this is an important message to send in a climate of rising sentiments against globalization and "outsiders" or immigrants.

CONCLUSION

2017 is a significant year for ASEAN and the EU. ASEAN celebrates its golden jubilee and the EU marked 60 years since the signing of the Treaties of Rome. The two regional organisations together celebrate 40 years of their partnership. Yet, not all is well. Geopolitical tensions and troubles within their own respective regions have challenged both the EU and ASEAN. But it is also in these times of crises that the two partners should find strength in their partnership for the EU to develop strategic autonomy and ASEAN to regain its centrality in the various regional architectures fronted by ASEAN in the hope that the Asia-Pacific would remain stable and peaceful.

Yeo Lay Hwee is Director of the European Union Centre in Singapore and also Council Member, Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) and Adjunct Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).