



CHAPTER 07

ASEAN-EU: Strategic Partners Finding Their Strategy

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INTRODUCTION

On 1 December 2020, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU) elevated their longstanding relations to a Strategic Partnership. Previously organised in the form of a Dialogue Partnership, the two regional organisations stepped up their cooperation to emphasise their “shared values and principles of a rules-based international order, effective, sustainable multilateralism, as well as free trade” (EU-ASEAN 2021, 10). Not only are ASEAN and the EU the two most advanced regional integration projects in the world, but they also together represent over 1 billion people and almost 25% of global economic power. While economic ties have always been strong, certain asymmetries in the field of security and political cooperation remain (Páldi 2021). Thus, the Strategic Partnership presents an important opportunity for the two blocs to present their relationship as an important model for inter-regional cooperation, underlining effective multilateralism and their commitment to the rules-based international order in a global climate increasingly characterised by unilateralism, protectionism, and transnational crises alike. To do so, ASEAN and the EU will have to move beyond political statements by strengthening their ties in the political and security domain and producing concrete outcomes.

AN EVER-EVOLVING PARTNERSHIP

The relationship between ASEAN and the EU has grown considerably in the past decades, both in scope and depth (Chirathivat 2020; Xuechen 2018). First informal relations were established between the European Economic Community (EEC), a predecessor of today's EU, consisting of six members, and ASEAN which then had five member countries. The ties were formalised at the 10th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in 1977 and became institutionalised with the signing of the ASEAN-EEC Cooperation Agreement in 1980. That first agreement underlined equality of the signing parties while, at the same time, underscoring the different levels in terms of development of the respective ASEAN members (ASEAN 1980). Thus, the relationship at that time can be classified as a traditional donor-recipient relationship, focusing on economic, commercial and development initiatives.

While the size of both regional blocs had changed considerably by 2007, with ASEAN consisting of ten member states and the EU of 27 member states, the dialogue was considerably expanded through the adoption of the Nuremberg Declaration. All the signing parties committed to supporting regional integration by fostering strong regional organisations to tackle local and global security issues (Council of the European Union 2007). In 2012, as part of its larger engagement with Asia, the EU took its engagement with ASEAN once again to the next level by acceding to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and adopting the Bandar Seri Begawan Plan of Action to strengthen the enhanced partnership through political and security engagement in Southeast Asia (Nuttin 2017).

The different levels of engagement outlined above demonstrate how the cooperation between ASEAN and the EU has expanded over the past 44 years from a narrow focus on trade, investment, and development to include a range of social and cultural aspects, as well as political and security dialogues. The EU has been represented with an accredited Ambassador to ASEAN since 2015 and with 25 dedicated ASEAN Ambassadors from the European member states (EEAS 2016).

Today's relationship between the two regional entities is formally based on a three-level approach (Cameron 2020). Firstly, there is a continent-to-continent Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) informal platform for a dialogue approach. ASEM includes all ASEAN and EU member states and Australia, Bangladesh, China, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, the Republic of Korea, Norway, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Switzerland, and Russia. The EU and the ASEAN Secretariat also participate in these informal meetings as institutional partners. Secondly, there is a region-to-region structure with 20 ASEAN-EU dialogues. They can be topically clustered into five thematic groups: climate and environmental sustainability; gender, labour, and human rights; infrastructure; health and science; and trade and economy (EU-ASEAN 2021, 15). Thirdly, there are various bilateral relations between ASEAN and EU member states. The numerous consultations are organised through an extensive set of regional convening forums, including the ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting, ASEAN-EU Senior Officials' Meeting, the ASEAN EU-Joint Cooperation Committee, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to which the EU is a dialogue partner (Páldi 2021).

The EU is the biggest donor to the ASEAN Secretariat with over €200 million grant funding in support of regional integration from 2014 to 2020. The two multiannual EU flagship programmes for development cooperation in ASEAN are the Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (E-READI) and the Enhanced ASEAN Regional Integration Support (ARISE Plus). With funding of €20 million for 2017–2023, E-READI aims to support ASEAN integration, poverty reduction and inclusive growth, while assisting the implementation of the ASEAN Community Blueprints and supporting experience exchanges through sectoral policy dialogues. In addition, the ARISE Plus programme, endowed with €40 million for 2017–2022, supports ASEAN economic integration in trade facilitation and harmonisation, customs and transport procedures, intellectual property rights quality, civil aviation, and the integration of monitoring and statistics (Caspary 2020).

¹Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

²Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

³The five dialogues included are Environment and Climate Change, Circular Economy, Natural Capital, Sustainable Development, Green Technology.

⁴The three dialogues included are Gender Equality, Safe Migration and Labour Rights, and Human Rights.

⁵The seven dialogues included are Trade and Business, Digital Economy and Society, Road Transport, Fisheries and IUU, Euro-codes, Energy and Maritime Transport.

⁶The two dialogues included are Science and Research, and Health.

⁷The three dialogues included are Transnational Crime and Cyber Security, Maritime Security, and Security and Defence.

Since 2019, an additional €50 million for country-level national trade support programmes interventions have been made available through ARISE plus (EU-ASEAN 2021). With further initiatives in 2020 and 2021 dedicated to pandemic response and preparedness, smart green cities, governance and domestic accountability, forest governance and infrastructure investment, the EU's financial commitment to ASEAN will continue in the coming years.

However, despite the increased level of inter-regional cooperation over the past decade, the EU is often accused of preferring bilateral engagement with individual states of ASEAN over engaging in inter-regional dialogues (Gilson 2020). The EU's interest in concluding a regional Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with ASEAN is often cited in this regard. Negotiations on an FTA were launched in 2007, following the identification of ASEAN as a priority region the year before. However, due to limited progress and convergence, negotiations already came to a halt in 2009 (Binder 2020). Since then, the EU has completed a bilateral FTA with Singapore and Vietnam. While the bilateral engagement with individual ASEAN members is occasionally criticised for side-lining ASEAN as a grouping (Mattheis 2017), it is deliberately employed by the EU as a stepping stone towards the goal of a regional FTA (European Commission 2015). After all, the success of a region-to-region engagement with the ASEAN Secretariat remains highly dependent on the functioning of bilateral relations between the EU and ASEAN Member States (Kliem 2021).

The EU's interests in supporting inter-regional relations with ASEAN are manifold. First, regional forms of governance, such as ASEAN, are considered an opportunity to manage Europe's security concerns, economic gains, and project influence in world affairs (EU 2016). Beyond that, inter-regional relations with ASEAN have a legitimising purpose and are set to preserve the regional order and increase the EU's presence in Southeast Asia. However, it is important to note that because of fundamentally differing realities, the EU's experience of regional integration only has limited applicability to ASEAN (Allison-Reumann 2020).

RECENT SETBACKS

The EU considers ASEAN “a like-minded partner in a challenging geopolitical context” (EP 2021). However, away from the rather superficial rhetoric, several disagreements illustrate that the two organisations and their members do not always have streamlined priorities. The long road to the conclusion of the Strategic Partnership demonstrates the complexity of multifaceted cooperation between numerous political actors. The proposal to engage in a Strategic Partnership was already tabled by ASEAN in 2012, eight years before the Dialogue Partnership was effectively enhanced (Demonte 2021). The reason for the delay is a last-minute veto against the lifting of the partnership from Indonesia and Malaysia. Their objection was a retaliatory measure against a recast of the EU's renewable energy directive (RED II), which refers to the palm oil sector as a critical contributor to deforestation, resulting in biodiversity loss and greenhouse gas emissions.

On these grounds, the revised biofuels policy in RED II announces the EU's phasing out of palm oil-based biodiesel by 2030 (EP 2020a). Indonesia and Malaysia, in turn, considered the directive discriminatory against palm oil, one of their biggest export commodities. The Indonesian government accordingly filed a dispute in December 2019 at the World Trade Organization (WTO), declaring the EU's measures to be a violation of WTO's Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, as well as to the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures (WTO 2019). Malaysia followed by filing a similar dispute in January 2021. The palm-oil-related tension, a bilateral trade issue between the EU and two individual ASEAN members, stalled the advancement of the partnership status for both blocs for several years.

Other ASEAN members have also experienced trade disputes with the EU throughout the last years. In February 2020, the EU announced a partial withdrawal of its Generalized Scheme of Preferences "Everything But Arms" (EBA) for Cambodia, citing serious systematic human rights violations (Schmücking 2020). While the EU also considered ending duty and quota-free entry of Burmese products to the European Single Market, it ultimately decided against excluding Malaysia from the EBA benefits for progress made in the crucial area (European Commission 2020a). Still, the partial withdrawal of trade preference from Cambodia and the threat of withdrawal for Myanmar disrupted ties and probed the trust between the EU and ASEAN members.

What differentiates ASEAN from other regional EU partners is its dominant ideational guide, the so-called ASEAN Way. It promotes sovereignty norms and shields ASEAN Member States from external interference in their domestic affairs. In other words, the ASEAN Way secures member states a maximum level of sovereignty. Naturally, this impacts ASEAN's external relations with actors who have their own and sometimes diverging foreign policy priorities. Suppose the newly achieved Strategic Partnership is not an empty phrase but becomes a catalyst for effective multilateral cooperation at eye level. In that case, the EU must pursue cooperation in conformity with the ASEAN Way. Pursuing the road ahead will not be simple, with expected differences between the EU and ASEAN in traditionally controversial policy areas, such as democracy and human rights. For the EU, democracy is one of its founding values, pursuit in all external policies and a strategic interest (European Commission 2020b). In contrast, ASEAN is not intended to be a collective forum for democracy promotion (Rüland 2021). Yet, while the elevated Partnership in practice is a commitment to regular summits at the leader level, it is most importantly an opportunity for Southeast Asian and European policymakers to find common ground in areas that can only be tackled together.

ECONOMIC AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CONNECTIVITY

The overarching theme that has repeatedly reaffirmed the commitment of the relations between ASEAN and the EU is connectivity. This is an all-encompassing concept of deepening economic and social relations to enhance economic and political-cultural ties. Connectivity covers many policy areas, including institutions, infrastructure, financial and digital cooperation, energy, transport, research, trade, and investment facilitation. By including soft and hard aspects of policymaking, connectivity is suggested to establish a level playing field between the partners; foster inclusiveness, fairness, and transparency; and achieve mutual benefits, while serving the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (ASEM 2017). Connectivity is hence a guiding principle and all-encompassing approach to closer ASEAN-EU cooperation. In its main communication on better connecting Asia and Europe, the EU proposes several concrete policy proposals and initiatives to enhance sustainable and rules-based connectivity, exploiting existing and planned EU networks (EC 2018). In addition, the freely accessible online ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal was set up to measure and monitor progress through collated and curated data and figures.

Even though the EU has officially confirmed it, many observers assess the communication on connectivity to be the EU's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative. China was declared a systemic rival to the EU in 2019. Its initiative is considered an attempt to shape globalisation according to Chinese interests, giving subsidised Chinese companies advantages over European ones and obstructing free trade. Therefore, the European approach to connectivity strongly underlines non-discriminatory market practices, a level playing field for businesses, as well as high environmental, social, and financial sustainability of the foreseen connectivity projects (D'Ambrogio 2021). This comprehensive approach is likely to face issues in multiple ASEAN countries. It could clash with political and economic priorities on normative, regulatory, and political rights in some member states. Yet, the current global economic and political climate leaves ASEAN and the EU no other option than rationalising connectivity projects as best as they can to achieve efficiency and sustainability by enhancing multilateral connectivity.

The outbreak of the global COVID19 pandemic has disrupted global economic growth and continued to unfold its impacts on individuals and governments alike. While most advanced economies are expected to regain their pre-pandemic income levels by 2022, emerging market and developing economies are much less likely to quickly recover due to highly unequal vaccine access and partial withdrawals of macroeconomic support (World Bank 2021). Meetings between EU and ASEAN officials, such as their virtual exchange on 20 March 2020, are an important channel. They provide officials with an opportunity to exchange information, share best practices, and commit to actions on disease control.

Future meetings should discuss how to best strengthen and utilise regional and international mechanisms for better vaccine distribution and mitigating the economic and social shocks of COVID19. Tourism is an important sector in this regard, as it contributes both to the socio-cultural and economic pillars. Many ASEAN and EU members largely depend on tourism inside and outside the respective regional blocs and prioritise spending and investment driven by related industries (Yeo and Tonchev 2021). The conclusion of the ASEAN-EU Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement (AE CATA), the world's first inter-regional agreement on air transportation, in June 2021 was a step in the right direction. The agreement offers a variety of economic opportunities by facilitating the operation of passenger and cargo services for ASEAN and EU airlines. It, therefore, rebuilds air disruptions caused by the pandemic and offers important business, trade, tourism, and people-to-people links for the years to come (EU 2021).

Besides its numerous disruptions, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated unintended positive effects for ASEAN and the EU's digital connectivity. Traditionally viewed as a synonym for energy and transport infrastructure, connectivity during the pandemic has been proven to include a wide range of digital services, all requiring their infrastructure and investment. Accordingly, ASEAN and the EU should further increase their digital connectivity instead of using the available funding on costly and often risky transport infrastructure projects. That more than 300 million internet users are in the ASEAN region and that 40 million users used online marketplaces for the first time in 2020 demonstrates the sheer size of target groups for common actions (Yeo and Tonchev 2021). However, the pandemic has also exemplified how existing inequalities within societies can replicate themselves in the online sphere. By providing equal access to digital technologies and infrastructures to people from urban and rural areas alike, improving digital literacy for all age groups, and closing the digital gender gap (EPD 2021), the EU can support ASEAN in boosting economic and human development and ultimately contribute to strengthening all the three ASEAN community pillars.⁸

OVERCOMING THE EXPECTATION -CAPABILITY GAP IN SECURITY COOPERATION

ASEAN is, without doubt, an essential partner to the EU for regional and global security. Peace and stability in the region are of utmost priority for the EU, as 40% of its foreign trade passes through the South China Sea (Islam and Yeo 2020). In addition, ASEAN has appraised an accomplished actor in political and security discussions around the Indo-Pacific, effectively bringing balance to the great power competition between China and the US. The EU, in contrast, is still primarily perceived as a trade partner in the region and less of a political or security provider (Páldi 2020). Compared to other security actors in the region, the EU has relatively weak military capabilities because it does not possess its armed forces. This often leads to the assumption that the EU is an underdeveloped security actor.

Although this may be true for a traditional understanding of security in terms of hard-power and military engagement, it is crucial to acknowledge the implications of issues not traditionally associated with security (Zwolski 2009). These include climate change, violent extremism, irregular migration, and maritime domain awareness, which are increasingly coming to the fore for national and regional security in ASEAN. Here, the EU has enormous added value to ASEAN's security. It needs to tackle the long-held misperception of being a mere trading partner by underlining its commitment to non-military cooperation and emphasising its approach of achieving sustainable security through diplomatic and preventive measures, as well as multilateral engagement. In terms of security, ASEAN needs to recognise that the EU is a different type of security actor from China or the US, but that it offers important contributions to regional peace and stability, nevertheless. The EU, in turn, needs to focus on the areas where it can deliver to avoid miscommunications and unfulfillable expectations (Rüppel 2019). Its commitment to norms, good governance, the rules-based order, and sustainability should not be regarded as a weakness in foreign policy but rather become a unique selling point in ASEAN's regional security.

The ongoing EU engagement in preventing and countering violent extremism by supporting a multi-stakeholder approach including government, security actors, civil society and the private sector in ASEAN illustrates the potential of this approach. In 2020, the EU launched a new partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) to tackle root causes of violent extremism and promote tolerance and respect for diversity in Southeast Asia. The 18-month project considers violent extremism a result of long-term social problems, such as political and economic marginalisation, and aims to strengthen communities at risk. Throughout the first phase of the project, which started in 2018 in line with the UN Secretary General's Plan of Action, the partnership also included cooperation with YouTube and young influential video-makers to promote positive content on the issue (EC 2020c). Furthermore, as foreseen in the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action 2018–2022, the EU and ASEAN can step up their cooperation on tackling extremist violence by sharing best practices and expertise through the revision of the implementation of the ASEAN-EU Work Plan to Combat Terrorism, increasing cooperation on the implementation of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its protocols, and promoting the interaction between national law enforcement agencies in ASEAN Member States and EUROPOL (ASEAN 2018).

TOWARDS STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT: SUSTAINING THE MOMENTUM

The newly achieved Strategic Partnership between the EU and ASEAN is a crucial milestone in the inter-regional relationship that offers a multitude of prospects for increased cooperation in the years to come.

⁸The three ASEAN community pillars are Political and Security Cooperation, Economic Cooperation and Socio-cultural cooperation.

While economic cooperation has always been strong between the two blocs, the inception of this new phase offers a valuable opportunity to step up the EU's political and security engagement in Southeast Asia. It has the potential to reignite the EU's enthusiasm for deepening its commitment to ASEAN as a whole instead of individual member states. At this point, the conclusion of a region-to-region FTA remains a distant endeavour, as economic and political disagreements with some ASEAN Member States persist. Inter-regional free trade should nevertheless remain the ultimate goal in the ASEAN-EU economic relationship, not least because it would be an opportunity to streamline political ties between the partners in the long term. With several geopolitical, environmental, and domestic challenges, including the post-COVID19 economic recovery, climate change and the political crisis in Myanmar, increased cooperation between ASEAN and the EU is not an option but an outright necessity. Bridging differing views between member states from both sides, especially in controversial policy areas such as democracy and human rights, will remain a major hurdle in this regard.

For both organisations to sustain the momentum of this achievement and move beyond undefined political catchphrases, agreeing on a practical framework for action will be key. Without any official definition, the Strategic Partnership, for now, is a mutual commitment to regular summits at the leaders' level. This opportunity should not be underestimated as regular high-level interactions have an important potential to increase political influence. It will be an important forum for the EU to present itself to ASEAN leaders as a viable third alternative in the power struggle between China and the US without jeopardising its non-interfering principle. To move beyond its reputation as a mere trading partner and position itself as a serious political and security actor in the region, the EU must better communicate its foreign policy priorities and red lines with ASEAN. In this context, the most important approach is underlining the common commitment to the inclusive, sustainable, and multi-lateral rules-based order.

In this regard, future connectivity projects have a high potential of tackling the economic shocks of the COVID19 pandemic in Southeast Asia, including the resurgence of the tourism industry. With the engagement on digital connectivity still being in an initial state, the EU and ASEAN can shape and implement relevant international norms and standards together. In terms of security, the EU must show ASEAN that it can make an indispensable contribution in non-traditional security areas, including preventing violent extremism and climate change. The future cooperation should include coordinated confidence-building measures, capacity building, and preventive diplomacy in these fields to enhance multi-layered cooperation and foster the rules-based multilateral order. Becoming Strategic Partners has been a conscious decision that will require both partners to show sustained commitment and increase communication and investments. Going forward, this commitment will have to be filled with coherent actions, trade flows, and cooperation to promote sustainable and green growth and spread rules-based multilateralism by placing the new Strategic Partnership in regional and multilateral fora.

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