

European Strategic Approaches in the Indo-Pacific: A View from Southeast Asia

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INTRODUCTION

The international system is undergoing transition and so is the Asia-Pacific economic and security architecture, conceptually giving way to a multipolar Indo-Pacific construct. The US-led liberal order that came about in the immediate aftermath of World War II is now being challenged by different conceptions, dynamics, and visions, raising implications not just for the regional landscape and ASEAN's central role within it, but also for strategic engagement by both regional and extra-regional powers with ASEAN.

While linking the Indian and the Pacific Oceans is not a new geostrategic concept,¹ its prevalence in geopolitical discourse has been propelled primarily by the rapid rise of China and India with their increasingly ambitious economic and strategic outlooks on regional affairs. The narrative of an Indo-Pacific region, however, is not one solely of the rise of China and India, but of the competing interests of regional and external, major as well as middle, powers alike – Japan, Australia, United States, South Korea, ASEAN, the European Union and its member states.

In fact, the idea of an Indo-Pacific region may be traced back to when former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addressed the Indian Parliament in 2007 where he spoke of the “Confluence of the Two Seas.”² The Indo-Pacific concept made the news again in November 2017 when the revived Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – comprising the US, Australia, Japan and India – reconvened around the

1. Hussain, Nazia, and Tan Ming Hui. 21 August 2018. The Indo-Pacific: Clarity, Inclusivity and ASEAN Centrality. The Asia Dialogue. (<https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/08/21/the-indo-pacific-clarity-inclusivity-and-asean-centrality/>).

2. Abe, Shinzo. 22 August 2007. Confluence of the Two Seas. Parliament of India. (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>).

idea of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” region.³ The US followed up by renaming the US Pacific Command to the US Indo-Pacific Command in May 2018 and the Pentagon released its Indo-Pacific strategy report, which declared the Indo-Pacific “the single most consequential region for America’s future”.⁴

Countries around the region subsequently pitched in with their own narrative of what the Indo-Pacific concept entails – Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that the core of the Indo-Pacific region will be ASEAN, even as the Indian Ocean holds the “key to India’s future”.⁵ Australia’s 2017 foreign policy white paper established that Canberra held a bipartisan view of the country’s strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific and that security could be enhanced through partnerships with other maritime democracies in the region.⁶ As a resident Indo-Pacific power with substantial interests in the region, France was the first European Union (EU) member state to put forward its Indo-Pacific strategy, which is based on multilateral cooperation — in particular with ASEAN, Australia, India, and Japan.⁷

Not to be left behind in shaping the narrative of a region where it wields a central role, ASEAN released the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” (AOIP) at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in June 2019. The AOIP offers the vision of an inclusive Indo-Pacific region with ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation and ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) providing platforms for dialogue and implementation of this cooperation.⁸

As the Indo-Pacific narrative began unfolding with more stakeholders involved in shaping the regional order, a widely held assumption was that Europe does not have a major strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific, and that whatever interest

3. Hussain, Nazia, and Tan Ming Hui. 21 August 2018. The Indo-Pacific: Clarity, Inclusivity and ASEAN Centrality. *The Asia Dialogue*. (<https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/08/21/the-indo-pacific-clarity-inclusivity-and-asean-centrality/>).

4. The Department of Defense. 2019. Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. (<https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>).

5. MEA.gov.in. 1 June 2018. Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue. (<https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>).

6. Medcalf, Rory. 2019. Indo-Pacific Visions: Giving Solidarity a Chance. *Asia Policy* 14. (<https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2019.0043>).

7. Nicolas, Françoise. 12 December 2019. France’s Indo-Pacific strategy: inclusive and principled. *East Asia Forum*. (<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/12/12/frances-indo-pacific-strategy-inclusive-and-principled/>).

8. Hussain, Nazia. 17 July 2019. The Idea of Indo-Pacific: ASEAN Steps In. *RSIS Commentaries*. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-idea-of-indo-pacific-asean-steps-in/#.YVLw3GaA7DL>).

there may be was largely driven by economic considerations.⁹ This sentiment has prevailed in the way ASEAN perceives the EU – a “peripheral player”, a reliable economic and development partner at best, but with scepticism of the prospect of the EU playing any major security role in the region. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, acknowledged prevailing perceptions regarding the EU: “If we want to be a geopolitical actor, we also have to be perceived as a political and security actor in the region, not just as a development cooperation, trading or investment partner.”¹⁰

While the EU has not been actively involved in regional security issues, its first European Security and Defense Policy mission in Asia – the 2005 Aceh Monitoring Mission in Indonesia – was considered a success for the EU but one which many ASEAN countries often fail to recall as a demonstration of the EU’s role as a security actor.¹¹ Perhaps it is the geographical reality of a distant Europe or its limited security presence in the Indo-Pacific – the UK and France are the only European countries to have an established military presence in the region – which falls short in comparison to other powers with a more robust agenda for security cooperation with ASEAN. Considering that the Indo-Pacific is primarily seen by some quarters as a burgeoning defence and security concept, countries in the region may not appreciate the EU as a key strategic partner in an evolving regional order increasingly defined by geopolitical tensions and great power rivalry. Moreover, the EU’s preoccupation with internal issues and Brexit also contributed to the perception that the regional organisation may not have the bandwidth to be actively involved in shaping the Indo-Pacific regional order.

Whatever the prevailing perceptions and realities may be, a multipolar regional order is in the making and both ASEAN and the EU are reimagining a narrative of a mutually beneficial partnership. The two blocs have finally elevated their relationship to an “EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership” on 1 December 2020,¹² providing

9. Mohan, Raja C, and John J. Vater. 2019. *Europe in the Indo-Pacific: Moving from Periphery to the Centre?* Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore. (<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Europe-Indo-Pacific-South-Asia-Discussion-Papers-Complete-Report.pdf>).

10. Borrell, Josep. 5 June 2021. *Why I went to Jakarta and why the Indo-Pacific matters for Europe*. European External Action Service. (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/99613/why-i-went-jakarta-and-why-indo-pacific-matters-europe_en).

11. Gare, Frederic. 2019. *Defining New Grounds for Cooperation between the EU and ASEAN*. Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore. (<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Europe-Indo-Pacific-South-Asia-Discussion-Papers-Complete-Report.pdf>).

12. EEAS.europa.eu. 1 December 2020. *Co-chairs’ press release of the 23rd ASEAN-EU ministerial meeting*. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/01/co-chairs-press-release-of-the-23rd-asean-eu-ministerial-meeting/>).

a framework for deepening engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. As the top EU official Josep Borrell rightly observed, the “EU-ASEAN partnership is no longer a luxury but a necessity.”¹³ Outside the EU’s ambit, a post-Brexit United Kingdom is also proactively engaging the region in order to substantiate its vision for a “Global Britain”, becoming ASEAN’s 11th Dialogue Partner earlier this year and thus ending the regional bloc’s 25-year moratorium on new dialogue partners.¹⁴

As Europe gears up to engage Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific region with the release of individual and EU-level Indo-Pacific strategies, this paper will conceptualise ASEAN’s expectations and concerns regarding great power behaviour in the region, and provide a Southeast Asian perspective of European strategic approaches in the Indo-Pacific.

I. ASEAN EXPECTATIONS VIS-À-VIS GREAT POWER BEHAVIOUR

An ASEAN-centric regional architecture has been a sustained fixture in the Asia-Pacific since the end of the Cold War, with the major regional multilateral institutions being ASEAN-led, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM)-Plus and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Today, the emergence of both contending visions of regional order as well as normative challenges to an established ASEAN-centric regional order requires ASEAN to have a fresh narrative to keep itself in the centre of the fluid situation and to stay relevant as a valuable partner and interlocutor for the major powers. ASEAN welcomes engagement with external partners via the various ASEAN-led mechanisms, with an expectation that partners acknowledge ASEAN Centrality and respect the principles of the “Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia” (TAC). The TAC has since emerged as the basic normative framework for ASEAN to engage the major powers: “Through the TAC, ASEAN asserted the basic rules of the game for international relations in Southeast Asia, including respect for national independence, sovereignty and territorial independence, freedom from external interference, subversion or

13. Borrell, Josep. 20 September 2020. Strengthening EU-ASEAN partnership, an urgent necessity. European External Action Service. (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/85434/strengthening-eu-asean-partnership-urgent-necessity_en).

14. Septiari, Dian. 6 August 2021. UK becomes ASEAN’s newest dialogue partner, ending 25-year moratorium. The Jakarta Post. (<https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2021/08/06/uk-becomes-aseans-newest-dialogue-partner-ending-25-year-moratorium.html>).

coercion, and commitments to the peaceful resolution of disputes and the non-use of force.”¹⁵

Moreover, ASEAN requires countries seeking to join the EAS – the only leaders-led platform that includes all relevant players in the Indo-Pacific, and which has the potential to become the premier Track 1 forum for Indo-Pacific cooperation – to accede to the TAC. Besides ASEAN member states, the consent of 27 countries, including major powers (China acceded to the TAC in 2003, followed by the US in 2009 and the EU in 2012), to the TAC indicates ASEAN’s status as a pivotal actor, so much so that these powers pledge respect for regional norms and pay “ritual obeisance to ASEAN Centrality.”¹⁶ ASEAN nevertheless reserves concerns about how committed these TAC signatories really are when it comes to actually recognising ASEAN centrality in practice.

The United States under the Trump administration did not instil confidence that they pay heed to ASEAN Centrality. Not only did the US withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), but despite declaring the Indo-Pacific “the single most consequential region for America’s future” in the Pentagon’s Indo-Pacific strategy report, Washington sent a relatively low-level delegation to the annual ASEAN Summit in 2019 where discussions on the Indo-Pacific were set to be a priority.¹⁷ To ASEAN, this was testimony to the fact that the US cannot always be relied upon to show up in support of ASEAN Centrality.

The other major power in the region, China, is not too enamoured with ASEAN Centrality. While Beijing is happy to express support for ASEAN – so long as ASEAN member states do not explicitly challenge Chinese interests – it is also aware that ASEAN member states have diverse interests and do not speak in a single voice. ASEAN continues to see China as the most influential political-strategic power in the region albeit with a fair share of anxiety about it.¹⁸

Regardless of ASEAN’s concerns pertaining to the intentions of major powers in the region, the regional grouping is not interested in keeping great powers at

15. ASEAN Briefs. 2019. ASEAN and Indo-Pacific: Beyond the Outlook. The Habibie Center. (<http://habibiecenter.or.id/img/publication/e6046e0b1b2a3b367653955508bd71f7.pdf>).

16. Kausikan, Bilahari. 30 December 2020. Will ASEAN Survive Until 2030? Australian Institute of International Affairs. (<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/will-asean-survive-until-2030/>).

17. Hussain, Nazia. 11 November 2019. Next ASEAN Summit: How Will Vietnam Lead? RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/next-asean-summit-how-will-vietnam-lead/#.YVMPgmaA6IY>).

18. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. 2021. The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report. (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>).

bay either and recognises that the presence of external partners helps maintain the strategic balance in the region.¹⁹ As ASEAN looks to mitigate increasing reservations regarding the US commitment to ASEAN-led institutions and counter China's expanding footprint in the region, European presence collectively gives ASEAN an additional card to play in times of geostrategic uncertainty.

Europe is largely deemed to be more supportive of ASEAN Centrality given its familiarity with ASEAN diplomatic patterns and its experience in working with ASEAN to achieve mutual objectives of rules-based multilateralism. However, ASEAN's collective memory of the EU's top-down approach in the early stages of the relationship – the EU's self-perception of a “normative power” and ASEAN relegated to being a norm recipient of EU-promoted norms such as democracy, human rights and good governance – still resonates within ASEAN circles. Concerns over human rights, democracy and the rule of law prompted the EU to suspend high-level contacts with ASEAN during the 1990s, especially after Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia became ASEAN member states.²⁰ It is telling that the ASEAN-EU Dialogue Partnership took 43 years to be elevated to the level of a Strategic Partnership.

ASEAN today is more astute, and unlike during the Cold War, the regional grouping has multifaceted goals and interests to manage and pursue, stemming from their own domestic populations' aspirations as well as the more complex international environment.²¹ In their capacity as strategic partners, ASEAN expects a partnership of equals with the EU and for the EU to accept differences in norms and standards since ASEAN has not had the years of sovereignty and growth that the EU has had to arrive at a certain standard to the liking of Europe.

ASEAN still harbours doubts about whether the EU can move past the asymmetrical donor-recipient nexus: “There is a broader sentiment among ASEAN representatives – at both track one and two levels – that the EU still displays residues of a condescending, somewhat moralistic attitude towards ASEAN; whether in trade, good governance, or human rights.”²² ASEAN is also wary of an ASEAN-EU agenda that is skewed towards how the EU can assist ASEAN rather than also

19. ASEAN Briefs. 2019. ASEAN and Indo-Pacific: Beyond the Outlook. The Habibie Center. (<http://habibiecenter.or.id/img/publication/e6046e0b1b2a3b367653955508bd71f7.pdf>).

20. Xuechen, Iris Chen. 2018. The Role of ASEAN's Identities in Reshaping the ASEAN-EU Relationship. *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 40. (DOI: 10.1355/cs40-2c).

21. Ng, Joel. 8 July 2021. Presentation at the Embassy of France-RSIS Panel Webinar on France as an Indo-Pacific Nation: Security and Multilateralism in Challenging Times.

22. Kliem, Frederick. 5 November 2019. ASEAN-EU Partnership: How “Strategic” is Europe's Approach? RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/asean-eu-partnership-how-strategic-is-europes-approach/#.YVMsnWaA6IZ>).

identify what ASEAN can teach the EU – a patronising stance that leads to a sense of EU condescension across Southeast Asian capitals.²³

The EU needs to be conscious of and rectify its overly normative approach towards ASEAN. Not only for ASEAN's sake but also for the successful implementation of the EU's own initiatives in the Indo-Pacific which need ASEAN buy-in if it is not simply going to be dictating terms to the region.²⁴ Being a pivotal actor, "ASEAN provides the tipping point where its support can give vital momentum to any initiative in the region, and this is an open platform for external powers to harness."²⁵

The EU and European countries would do well to understand the need to be flexible in its engagement with ASEAN and arrive at solutions acceptable to all, akin to the "ASEAN Way" – characterised by informal dialogue, moving at a pace comfortable to all, and with all decisions based on consensus,²⁶ much in contrast to the EU's binding agreements and regulatory frameworks. More importantly, the EU will have to come to terms with its own identity dilemma of being a strategic actor versus a normative power.²⁷

II. ASEAN PERSPECTIVE OF EUROPEAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

As the global political and economic centre of gravity shifts to the Indo-Pacific, Europe is reimagining its engagement with the region in order to maintain an open and inclusive architecture conducive to European interests. In fact, European countries as well as the EU have released their respective Indo-Pacific strategies which recognise ASEAN as a pivotal actor and a natural partner given the bloc's propensity for rules-based multilateralism. France led the way in 2019, followed by the German Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region and the Dutch Indo-Pacific Strategy Report in 2020. The UK emphasises an Indo-Pacific "tilt" in its post-Brexit

23. Ibid.

24. Ng, Joel. 8 July 2021. Presentation at the Embassy of France-RSIS Panel Webinar on France as an Indo-Pacific Nation: Security and Multilateralism in Challenging Times.

25. Ng, Joel. 17 August 2020. ASEAN as Pivotal Actor: Balancing Centrality and the Indo-Pacific. RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/asean-as-pivotal-actor-balancing-centrality-and-the-indo-pacific/#.YVMuu2aA6IY>).

26. Yates, Robert. 2016. ASEAN as the "regional conductor": understanding ASEAN's role in Asia-Pacific order. *The Pacific Review* 30. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2016.1264458>).

27. Kliem, Frederick. 5 November 2019. ASEAN-EU Partnership: How "Strategic" is Europe's Approach? RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/asean-eu-partnership-how-strategic-is-europes-approach/#.YVMsnWaA6IZ>).

Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy released earlier this year.²⁸

While there are variations in the individual European strategies with regard to national aspirations – France being an Indo-Pacific resident power, Germany and the Netherlands are big trading nations, and the UK has significant historical ties to the region – these European approaches strike a similar note: one of inclusivity, multipolarity, defence of multilateralism and preservation of a rules-based order. Moreover, France, Germany and the Netherlands share the assessment that a consolidated EU Indo-Pacific strategy would provide better leverage to defend their national interests and gain more influence in this contested region.²⁹ The three countries have been the driving force behind the “EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” which was adopted in April 2021.

Since the release of the EU Indo-Pacific strategy, EU top official Josep Borrell has been doing the rounds of Southeast Asian capitals driving home the EU’s basic message: that the EU will work with its partners in the Indo-Pacific to respond to emerging dynamics that are affecting regional stability.³⁰ In a thinly veiled jibe at the major powers turning Southeast Asia into a theatre of competition and rivalry, Borrell presented a picture of the EU as a reliable neutral partner: “We are perhaps not as flashy as other partners, but we also do not zig-zag. We have no hidden agenda. What you see is what you get. We are reliable and predictable. We can and do commit for the long-term.”³¹

Borrell’s words are surely welcomed by ASEAN elites who have long complained about the fickleness of the US’s presence and commitment to the region. With Europe facing many of the challenges emanating from China’s unilateral posturing in the South China Sea – something ASEAN countries have long had to grapple with – the two regional organisations see an opportunity to enhance their partnership in the Indo-Pacific region.

28. Cook, Malcolm. 17 May 2021. Europe’s Indo-Pacific Adoption: Two Southeast Asian Challenges. ISAS Insights. (<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/europes-indo-pacific-adoption-two-southeast-asian-challenges/>).

29. Esteban, Mario, and Ugo Armanini. 10 March 2021. European Indo-Pacific strategies: convergent thinking and shared limitations. Elcano Royal Institute. (http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/europa/ari30-2021-esteban-armanini-european-indo-pacific-strategies-convergent-thinking-and-shared-limitations).

30. EEAS.europa.eu. 4 June 2021. The EU approach to the Indo-Pacific: Speech by High Representative/ Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). (https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/timor-leste/99556/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre_en).

31. Ibid.

In terms of ASEAN and its member states' perspectives of the different Indo-Pacific approaches of individual European states, the response to Europe's renewed focus on the Indo-Pacific is going to be assessed according to the domestic interests of ASEAN member states, as well as their perceptions of the agendas of the European states.³² Nonetheless, the EU Indo-Pacific strategy strikes a few right notes for ASEAN to positively welcome European presence in the region.

A. An Inclusive Strategy for the Indo-Pacific

A crucial element of the EU Indo-Pacific strategy which closely aligns with ASEAN's own "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP) is the emphasis on inclusiveness. The EU Indo-Pacific strategy aims to deepen regional integration and is inclusive for all partners in the region, including China, in recognition of the need to engage on issues of common interest. Brussels' diplomats reiterate: "We do not aim to create rival blocs or force countries to take sides."³³ Individual European countries that released their own Indo-Pacific strategies too take a more inclusive and nuanced approach towards China. The French and German Indo-Pacific documents barely mention the US, and the few times they do is mostly to highlight the differences between the inclusive elements of the European vision for the region versus the exclusive China-containment narrative of Washington's FOIP.³⁴

This suits ASEAN well since the AOIP also stresses on inclusivity, steering clear from adopting the US-driven Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) or approaches conceived by other big powers. Although not overtly stated, the buzzword "free" already defines the conditionality associated with the FOIP concept. Thus, it may not be easy for China to be part of the FOIP even if Beijing wished to be included.

Despite China's assertive unilateral actions in the South China Sea, which have increasingly frustrated both ASEAN and the EU, the two regional organisations are keen to avoid being seen as siding with any overtly anti-China strategy. As ASEAN's largest trading partner, China has deeply entrenched trade relations and large-

32. Ng, Joel. 8 July 2021. Presentation at the Embassy of France-RSIS Panel Webinar on France as an Indo-Pacific Nation: Security and Multilateralism in Challenging Times.

33. EEAS.europa.eu. 4 June 2021. The EU approach to the Indo-Pacific: Speech by High Representative/ Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). (https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/timor-leste/99556/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre_en).

34. Heiduk, Felix, and Nedim Sulejmanović. 2021. Will the EU take view of the Indo-Pacific? Comparing France's and Germany's approaches. German Institute for International and Security Affairs. (https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/WP_EU_Indopacific_Heiduk_Sulejmanovic.pdf).

scale investment projects with the regional grouping.³⁵ Moreover, China is the EU's second-largest trading partner and a major investor – 18 EU member states have joined China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).³⁶ Hence, the emphasis on inclusivity is a welcome attribute for both sides to engage each other in the region while tacitly keeping an eye on Beijing.

B. A Multilateral Approach Utilising ASEAN-led Mechanisms

As ASEAN navigates the emerging multipolar order, the EU and European states can play a constructive role in partnering with the regional bloc to revive and strengthen the multilateral system, especially now under the framework of an elevated Strategic Partnership. The EU Indo-Pacific strategy declared its intent to support the ASEAN-led regional architecture and acknowledged ASEAN's centrality within it.³⁷ It also invited all stakeholders to better utilise the existing multilateral architecture for open dialogue to address differences and mediate great power discord.³⁸ In fact, the EU insisting that ASEAN provides the most effective platforms for the regional architecture is by itself a show of support for the ASEAN integration process and has been very welcome in this regard.³⁹

It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that the EU is seeking a more active participation in ASEAN-led platforms, applying for observer status at the ADMM-Plus and the East Asia Summit. The EU has also been supporting ASEAN to chair the ARF intersessional meeting on maritime security, alongside Australia and Vietnam, during the 2018 to 2022 term.⁴⁰

35. Kliem, Frederick. 27 August 2020. A China management strategy with ASEAN at its centre. East Asia Forum. (<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/08/27/a-china-management-strategy-with-asean-at-the-centre/>).

36. Singh, Anita Inder. 10 May 2021. A breadcrumb trail as Europe responds to a rising China. The Interpreter. (<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/breadcrumb-trail-europe-responds-rising-china>).

37. Piket, Vincent, and Igor Driesmans. 6 May 2021. ASEAN at the heart of the EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. The Jakarta Post. (<https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2021/05/05/asean-at-the-heart-of-the-eu-strategy-for-cooperation-in-the-indo-pacific-.html>).

38. Kliem, Frederick. 3 May 2021. EU Indo-Pacific Strategy: More than Meets the Eye. RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/eu-indo-pacific-strategy-more-than-meets-the-eye/#.YVMYD2aA6IZ>).

39. Ng, Joel. 8 July 2021. Presentation at the Embassy of France-RSIS Panel Webinar on France as an Indo-Pacific Nation: Security and Multilateralism in Challenging Times.

40. Yong, Deng. 2020. The Role of the EU in Asian Security: Between Transatlantic Coordination and Strategic Autonomy. Asia Policy 15. (<https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2020.0001>).

No doubt, the EU's inclusion to the EAS and ADMM-Plus would be a strong symbol of closer cooperation going forward. Although long talked about, the EU's inclusion to the EAS still has some challenges to overcome, not least of which is the need to build a consensus internally first within the EU on not making human rights the centrepiece of their Asian diplomacy, or at least go about it softly. ASEAN values the EU's commitment to its regional integration. After all, ASEAN changed one of its core treaties – the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) – to allow for accession by regional organisations. Almost a decade later, the EU remains the only regional organisation to have signed the TAC.

C. Europe as a “Third Way” for ASEAN

Southeast Asia is hardly new to navigating major power relations, attuned as it is to balancing US-China contestation as the region is often viewed by Beijing as a testing ground to launch its role as a big power in the international order.⁴¹ However, increasingly heightened US-China tensions today threaten to break up ASEAN along the fault lines created by its member states' external affiliations. The consequences of a rupture would not only be economic but strategic. ASEAN has to maintain its strategic relevance in managing the regional architecture. It has to develop a viable public position of not taking sides in the competitive dynamics between China and the US. These two major powers have accepted that ASEAN has a role to play and they want to have ASEAN on their respective sides. Therefore, ASEAN has to refurbish its existing mechanisms urgently, but this task will not be easy as China and the US expect ASEAN to favour their separate strategic calculus.

The escalating US-China rivalry in the region has created complications for traditional ASEAN diplomacy. As Southeast Asian countries seek to hedge between Beijing's assertiveness and Washington's uncertainty,⁴² alternative initiatives put forward by other major powers would serve to provide ASEAN member states the chance to offset their economic and financial dependence on China. As experts have pointed out, “[a]n engaged EU would easily slot into the region's security archi-

41. Stromseth, Jonathan. 2019. Don't make us choose: Southeast Asia in the throes of US-China rivalry. Foreign Policy at Brookings. (https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FP_20191009_dont_make_us_choose.pdf).

42. Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. 2016. Variations on a (Hedging) Theme: Comparing ASEAN Core States' Alignment Behavior. Korea Economic Institute. (<https://keia.org/publication/variations-on-a-hedging-theme-comparing-asean-core-states-alignment-behavior/>).

tecture [...]. It fits ASEAN's strategy of having all the big powers be players, so they all offset each other to an extent."⁴³

The EU could provide the counterbalance that ASEAN needs as a neutral actor. In fact, according to a 2021 survey conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, the EU emerges as the clear front-runner as a partner for ASEAN in the strategic hedging game, with 40.8 per cent of the respondents choosing the EU, followed closely by Japan (39.3 per cent).⁴⁴ Both ASEAN and the EU do not want to choose sides amid the new dynamic created by the US-China rivalry. As such, ASEAN could work with Europe towards a "third way" – there should be enough substance in the ASEAN-EU partnership for deeper collaboration, to develop more trust, and in the process keep from choosing sides. The EU's reliability and consistency will be increasingly valued assets as ASEAN carves out a "third way".⁴⁵

D. Trust in EU Actorness

ASEAN regards the EU as one of its most trusted external partners. The surveys conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute saw the EU's trust rating in the region jump in rankings – although Japan continues to be Southeast Asia's most trusted major power in 2021 (67.1 per cent), the number of respondents voting for confidence in the EU to "do the right thing" has increased from 38.7 per cent in 2020 to 51.0 per cent in 2021, while the share of distrust has dropped from 36.9 per cent to 29.6 per cent.⁴⁶ These trends hold true across both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia. Moreover, the report showed that respondents place their strongest confidence in the EU to maintain the rules-based order and uphold international law (32.4 per cent).⁴⁷ The number of ASEAN member states choosing the EU as their top choice in this respect has increased from six to nine in 2021,⁴⁸ indicating a growing agreement within the bloc on the EU's reliability.

43. Ang, Katerina. 2 February 2021. Europe pivots to Indo-Pacific with "multipolar" ambitions. *Nikkei Asia*. (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Europe-pivots-to-Indo-Pacific-with-multipolar-ambitions>).

44. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. 2021. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report*. (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>).

45. Borrell, Josep. 6 December 2020. *An EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership: how did that happen and what does it mean?* European External Action Service. (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/89962/An%20EU-ASEAN%20Strategic%20Partnership%20how%20did%20that%20happen%20and%20what%20does%20it%20mean?).

46. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. 2021. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report*. (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>).

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

The EU's strong principles vis-à-vis the rule of law make a good case for it not being easily swayed by special interests and having the ability to rise above the geopolitics of the US-China rivalry. This trust in EU actorness will go a long way in paving the "third way" for ASEAN. ASEAN perceives European partners as considered and cautious, having gone through the process of community building and regionalisation themselves. The EU comes across as responsible, possessing a certain understanding of regulatory measures, and a champion of the rules-based order.

III. AVENUES FOR CONVERGENCE AND COOPERATION

A multipolar Indo-Pacific allows for constructive partnerships among stakeholders across areas of converging interests. Both the EU and ASEAN Indo-Pacific documents identify maritime security and connectivity as two key areas for collaboration.

Maritime Security

While the EU may have limited military capabilities in the region, Brussels is currently exploring options on how to enhance its maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific – "The High-Level Dialogue on Maritime Security Cooperation later this year should come forward with concrete proposals, including on the presence of our naval assets."⁴⁹ ASEAN will undoubtedly follow this development closely as freedom of navigation, especially in the contested waters of the South China Sea, remains a major security concern for Southeast Asian states. Therefore, concerted efforts by Europe and like-minded countries will help ASEAN send a strategic message to Beijing that its destabilising actions in the region shall not go unnoticed.

Moreover, ASEAN favours the EU's experience, as a global normative power, in non-traditional security (NTS) issues such as Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, good ocean governance, capacity building in maritime domain awareness, information sharing and beyond.⁵⁰ The ADMM-Plus would be an ideal forum for further engagement in these NTS domain issues. In December 2020, an EU High

49. EEAS.europa.eu. 3 June 2021. Intervention by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the meeting with ASEAN CPRs. European External Action Service. (https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/association-southeast-asian-nations-asean/99541/intervention-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-meeting-asean-cprs_en).

50. Pejsova, Eva. 26 June 2019. Increased Relevance for EU Policy and Actions in the South China Sea. ISEAS Perspective. (https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_52.pdf).

Representative was invited for the first time to the ADMM-Plus forum, which engages key regional players such as China, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand and the US. This may suggest ASEAN possibly recognising the EU's potential as a security partner given that the ADMM-Plus brings together defence ministers of ASEAN and the "plus" countries to discuss regional security issues.

Connectivity

ASEAN leaders emphasise the importance of partnerships in implementing the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and promoting greater synergies amongst the various connectivity strategies.⁵¹ The EU Connectivity Strategy with Asia could complement ASEAN's MPAC 2025, thus addressing the huge infrastructure deficit in ASEAN member states. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates that about US\$210 billion a year in infrastructure investments from 2016 to 2020 are required for Southeast Asia to maintain its growth momentum.⁵²

Europe's connectivity initiatives could also alleviate the sustainability and environmental concerns of some ASEAN countries that had signed up for BRI projects. The EU's focus on transparency, local ownership, and fiscal and environmental sustainability with regard to its connectivity and infrastructure projects are welcome attributes under the current climate of suspicion surrounding some of the BRI projects in the region.⁵³ Normative attributes aside, whether the EU will follow through later this year in allocating 60 billion Euros at the upcoming budgetary cycle 2021 to 2027 toward investments in connectivity⁵⁴ will be a deciding factor in establishing the EU's commitment to enhancing connectivity between Asia and Europe.

51. ASEAN.org. 2 August 2021. Joint Communique of the 54th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting. (<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Joint-Communique-of-the-54th-ASEAN-Foreign-Ministers-Meeting-FINAL.pdf>).

52. SME.asia. 24 June 2019. Japan Still Leads Southeast Asia's Infrastructure Race. (<https://sme.asia/japan-still-leads-southeast-asias-infrastructure-race/>).

53. EEAS.europa.eu. 4 June 2021. The EU approach to the Indo-Pacific: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). (https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/timor-leste/99556/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre_en).

54. EC.europa.eu. 19 September 2018. Explaining the European Union's approach to connecting Europe and Asia. (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_18_5804).

CONCLUSION

ASEAN and Europe share a common strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific defined by a rules-based multilateral order, free and open markets, and a region inclusive for all. Despite this shared vision, the way ahead for any substantial strategic and security partnership beyond that of being reliable trade and development partners will not be without its challenges. First, the question is whether ASEAN and Europe can come to terms with the values debate. The general feeling in Southeast Asia is that Europe tends to be overly caught up in promoting values it deems most important, such as democracy and human rights, which does not always sit well with the region. In fact, unless Europe pays some consideration to the nuances of the economic and developmental situation of individual ASEAN member states, norm promotion alone will prove insufficient and even counterproductive to the EU's stated desire of being perceived as a strategic partner.

Brussels' view of a democratic backslide in Cambodia and human rights abuses in Myanmar has opened up the possibility of a revocation of duty-free market access under the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme, prompting tensions with the two countries.⁵⁵ ASEAN and the EU also differ on environmental issues – the EU's plan to phase out crude palm oil from its sources of biofuel by 2030 has not been well received by Indonesia and Malaysia. These issues still remain unresolved. Going forward, ASEAN and the EU need to agree on flexible and pragmatic cooperation, underscoring the fact that there will be differences in norms and principles. Having an understanding of each other's sensitivities and limitations is important, for which continued dialogue and consultation is key.

Second, is the issue of coherence, the lack of which may give mixed signals as to where the EU stands on strategic issues important to the region. Europe needs to be coherent in its approach to ASEAN, especially since several EU member states have released their own Indo-Pacific strategies, which are bound to come with certain national strategic interests of engaging with ASEAN. These varying national interests and possible prompting from external partners – the US, China or Russia – may act as a cause of divergence when it comes to the EU taking a stand as a whole on

55. Kliem, Frederick. 5 November 2019. ASEAN–EU Partnership: How “Strategic” is Europe’s Approach? RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/asean-eu-partnership-how-strategic-is-europes-approach/#.YVMsnWaA6IZ>).

strategically important issues.⁵⁶ For instance, coherence in the EU's position vis-à-vis Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS) – an issue of serious concern for ASEAN member states with competing claims in the SCS. Following the award of the arbitration tribunal on the SCS, the EU failed to reach a consensus on criticising Chinese unilateral actions, with Hungary and Greece supporting Beijing's position.⁵⁷ Both countries benefit from BRI infrastructure projects. Moreover, a recent survey conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations reveals that the EU is still torn when it comes to a coherent approach to China. Breaking with the EU's own Indo-Pacific strategy that emphasises inclusiveness, five countries – Belgium, Bulgaria, Latvia, Portugal, and Romania – define the Indo-Pacific strategy as being at least partly an anti-China tool.⁵⁸ If the EU and ASEAN are to have a meaningful long-term engagement as security partners, both sides need to adopt a coherent approach to the China question.

ASEAN and Europe have come a long way since relations were first formalised in 1977. As the regional architecture evolves, the two sides need to remain consistent in their political will to substantiate their relationship. A successful conclusion of an ASEAN-EU Free Trade Agreement will be a litmus test in the next chapter of this strategic partnership.

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56. Kugiel, Patryk. 2019. The European Union's Strategic View toward the Indo-Pacific. Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore. (<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Europe-Indo-Pacific-South-Asia-Discussion-Papers-Complete-Report.pdf>).

57. Gerstl, Alfred. 26 October 2018. The EU's interest and policy towards East Asia maritime security. Maritime Issues. (<http://www.maritimeissues.com/politics/the-eu39s-interest-and-policy-towards-east-asia-maritime-security.html>).

58. Grare, Frederic, and Manisha Reuter. 13 September 2021. Moving closer: European views of the Indo-Pacific. European Council on Foreign Relations. (<https://ecfr.eu/special/moving-closer-european-views-of-the-indo-pacific/#analysis-by-country>).