ASEAN in Practice Episode 16 Podcast Transcript

Denis: Good day, and welcome to the latest episode of the ASEAN in Practice podcast series. I'm your host, Denis Hew, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

The United Kingdom has become an increasingly active partner for ASEAN. In 2021, the UK became an ASEAN dialogue partner, and in 2024, the UK Mission to ASEAN and the ASEAN Secretariat launched the ASEAN-UK Economic Integration Programme (EIP)—a four-year initiative aimed at supporting ASEAN economic integration through technical assistance, capacity building, knowledge sharing, and work in areas such as digitisation, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), financial services, regulatory reform, and trade.

In this context, I am delighted to have Mr Kenn Especkerman-True join us in this podcast. Kenn is Southeast Asia's Director for Economics and Trade Policy at the British High Commission of the United Kingdom, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO for short. Based in Singapore, he works on the UK's economic and trade policy engagement with Southeast Asia, including cooperation with ASEAN and regional partners. Kenn's work sits at the intersection of trade policy, development cooperation, economic resilience, and regional integration. Issues that are now central to how ASEAN navigates a more fragmented and uncertain global economy. Kenn, welcome to the show. Could you briefly explain your role as Southeast Asia's Director for Economics and Trade Policy at FCDO?

Kenn: Thanks very much, Denis, and yes, it's a real pleasure to be here, and thank you again for the opportunity to join you on your podcast. Particularly, this month, as we celebrate ASEAN Day on 8 August. So, it is a real honour to be here with you. A little bit about myself and the role that I do at the FCDO in the British High Commission Singapore. I would say it really covers three main functions, that would be advocacy, analysis, and delivery. So perhaps to expand on the first, it's really about advocating for the region and helping our colleagues back in London understand the importance of this region as a whole, as well as through the lens of our bilateral relationships. The second, I would say around analysis, as an economist, it is personally really important for me. It's about spotting and analysing those regional trends that emerge and thinking through the implications for the region but also for the UK. And then the third area around delivery, is most of my work really, and that's about working with our UK embassies and high commissions across the region to deliver growth and prosperity for both the UK and for the region. And we do that through different mechanisms such as policy collaboration, knowledge sharing, and in some instances, providing technical assistance and capacity building. So that's broadly, what I cover.

Denis: Thanks, Kenn**.** So maybe I could drill down a little bit more. What does your team do in Singapore, in the Singapore office, and how does it support the UK's economic engagement in Southeast Asia?

Kenn: Yes, absolutely. So, a little bit more about the team here. My team in Singapore focuses first and foremost on a range of policy areas as well as some programming work as well. And that would be in the areas of economic policy, financial policy, trade policy, and intellectual property policy as well. So quite a lot of policy there, but that just goes to show how important the relationship between the UK and Singapore really is. And we do that to advance our mutual, goals, and objectives with Singapore.

With respect to your point around economic engagement, Denis, and how the team supports the region, I think can be best characterised of our own British High Commissioner, H.E. Nikesh Mehta OBE, on how he has really challenges us to approach our work, which is: How do we think regionally by design? So, what does that mean exactly? I'll give you some examples just to, to make it a little bit clearer. It's about making sure that all of the great work we do with Singapore bilaterally, also are also being thought through the lens regionally. How do we amplify that to the region? How do we extend that to the region? How do we replicate that idea to the region so that we can help other Southeast Asian countries and partner with them for mutual prosperity in the same way that we are doing for Singapore?

So just to bring that to about that to live a little bit, when we think about trade and exports, for example, we see Singapore as an essential hub for the growth of UK companies as it represents a gateway to the ASEAN region. So actually, around 60% of our UK exports to ASEAN go through Singapore. When we are thinking about trade therefore, that relationship with Singapore is also helping us to think through how we trade with the region. And our focus and I can go into a little bit more detail perhaps throughout the podcast. For this region, our focus is on the three “Ds”. So, we focus on trade and exports through the lens of defence, digital, and decarbonisation. All of these areas are part of the UK’s modern industrial strategy that we launched last year, which guides us throughout. I'd say it's not just about trade and exports. On standards, for example, Singapore is also a trusted partner for shaping regional standards and regulations, as you know, Denis, particularly through innovative trade policy. So, our partnerships, in areas like the UK-Singapore Digital Economy Agreement have now acted as a template for the wider region. For example, the ASEAN's Digital Economy Framework Agreement, which has now, substantially just been concluded. So that's great news for ASEAN. And that creates opportunities for both UK companies but also ASEAN companies.

I won’t stop there, maybe a little bit more, because I think it's really important to reference the brilliant work we're doing on climate as well. So, Singapore is already a pragmatic partner on global climate action, and particularly on carbon market standards and mobilising private finance for sustainable infrastructure and clean energy for example. It's actually launched its own Financing Asia’s Transition Partnership (FAST-P), which is a blended finance initiative, which we as the UK are contributing to. But it's fantastic that Singapore leading the way, and that the UK partnering with that initiative. That is just another area that we are working with Singapore, led by Singapore, for the benefit of the region.

Finally, it goes without saying really, Singapore through multilateralism is also an important part of our work in the mission and how we deliver for the region. So, whether that being, through the Group of 77 (G-77), the Commonwealth, ASEAN, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the World Trade Organisation (WTO). There are so many areas where we are working with Singapore and so we need to continue engaging with ASEAN through that to help expand the outcomes of mutual prosperity for us and ASEAN as a region.

But finally, and it would be bad if I didn't reference this in our podcast, not to forget all of the other colleagues that I work with, because our economic partnerships extend beyond Singapore. So, we have a network of economists working to deliver economic cooperation and mutual prosperity in all 11 AMS and with ASEAN directly as well. I think it's a real team effort, with Singapore leading the charge in many aspects but also working with this broader network across the region.

Denis: All right, you mentioned bilateral and regional engagement as well that the UK is working with ASEAN. So how do these two tracks, both bilateral and regional complement each other? Where do you see the greatest value in working directly with individual AMS? And when does it make more sense to work at the regional level with the ASEAN Secretariat?

Kenn: Thanks Denis, it's a really great question, Denis. I would say that it goes without saying really that you've got to do the work bilaterally and multilaterally. It's really a must rather than a choice. And I think that's true for most countries, not just the UK and how it engages with ASEAN and the AMS. I think what I would say is that complementarity is actually what this is about, and it is about reinforcement of messages, but also reinforcement of the follow-through for implementation. Maybe I could expand a little bit on that. For example, the way we work with both our bilateral embassies and high commissions and then also with our UK Mission to ASEAN multilaterally, we can amplify messages through the bilateral embassies—to host governments ahead of key meetings with ASEAN sectoral bodies where AMS are represented. So, we can sound out with the AMS in advance. But on the flip side, when we're working through, for example, our ASEAN-UK Economic Integration Programme (EIP), which we will come on to a little bit later. Initiatives like this, where we agree activities at the ASEAN level, we can then use our bilateral missions to really implement that in-country work. So, we see the concrete impacts of those ASEAN initiatives really affecting ASEAN citizens. So, just where it makes most sense, personally speaking from my experiences, I think working with ASEAN and the ASEAN Secretariat is probably most effective when you're collaborating on regional standards and areas where there's a requirement for collective action.

But sometimes, collective actions and decisions like in any multilateral forum, takes time. There might be instances where certain AMS are keen to move quicker and are able to move quicker. They are able to provide a proof of concept on an issue or an idea, and I think that's really important because we can already be piloting activities. And that's a positive thing. But also got to remember that the economic development of the region is not uniform, so there may be also other instances where countries have specific requirements which can create opportunities for the UK to partner as well.

Denis: I think the ASEAN-UK EIP, which was launched in 2024, I've mentioned earlier and you talked about and I've mentioned it in my introduction too. Maybe you can just share with us more details about the main objectives of that programme, particularly maybe in helping ASEAN achieve its goal of realising the ASEAN Economic Community in the longer term.

Kenn: Thanks Denis, I would be delighted too. But also, I jam just going to put a health warning up there, because I would be a little biased here. Because I'm the SRO, or the Senior Responsible Officer, for the programme, so you're going to hear amazing things. I'll put that up front for you. But, ultimately, our EIP, as we call it, is our main regional flagship initiative for economic development and prosperity to ASEAN. I think that's really critical that its purpose is to help, or should I say supercharge ASEAN's economic integration. We do that by providing targeted support to AMS through technical assistance or capacity building, and in some instances, it makes more sense through knowledge-sharing partnerships as well. The programme also has a particular focus on unlocking the potential for digitalisation given the agenda at the moment. I think that's really important. And the programme also has a strong focus on how we can think about MSMEs as a cross-cutting issue. So just to say a little bit more about the programme, it focuses on three areas. It’s about supporting regulatory reform to facilitate trade and economic activity. The second is around promoting open trade, a really important issue in these times. That is really about addressing barriers to trade between AMS, but also to promote global trade, including with the UK. And then also developing financial services to strengthen and modernise those services, and increase access to finance for citizens and businesses, across ASEAN. In those areas, I think one of the key things that we're really pushing the programme to do is on policy implementation. That is a really critical thing that I challenge our team on a daily basis, which is how do we make sure that we can get concrete results in those three areas of focus? Those three areas of focus are really defined by where the UK has something to offer—so in financial services, in regulatory excellence, and in trade facilitation. That's why the programme that we have, and it has really been defined by conversations and consultation with ASEAN and AMS but also where the UK has strength, and some comparative advantage niche to offer.

Denis: A recurring challenge for dialogue partners like the UK is ensuring that external support is aligned with ASEAN's own agenda. So how does the, for example the EIP, make sure that it's responding to ASEAN's priorities such as the ASEAN Economic Community?

Kenn: It's another really challenging question that we face in the EIP. I think for me and the experience we've had, over the sort of almost two years now of it running, I think there are three things that ensure that we are listening and aligning with ASEAN.

The first one is continued dialogue with our stakeholders. The second is about having a clear understanding about the scope of what our programme can do. And then the third is being clear about what the UK can offer. Just expanding on that a little bit on that, at the heart of all of our programming work, including the EIP, are led by robust evidence and understanding of the needs. And so, this is why it's really important that consultations with the AMS governments and also with ASEAN Secretariat's divisions and committees as well as the broader academic community and business stakeholders for example, is so critical. So, there's a lot of work before we even get started to ensure that the programme's demand-led, and it's delivering for what ASEAN wants. So that just at the starting point is how we ensure, at least when we design it, that it's focused on ASEAN priorities. Now, the tension comes and, it's really clear today, that what we develop is a multi-year programme that's focused on medium-term outcomes and trying to have those longer-term impacts whilst addressing emerging issues and new issues arising in the day. How do we get around that? The first to identify those emerging or new issues, that's where the continued dialogue with ASEAN Secretariat and member states is so critical so we need those people on the ground having those regular conversations. But your point about being agile really, and the sort of ability to respond to those challenges, we've designed the EIP to ensure that there's enough flexibility and wiggle room to have some space to respond to those issues where it meets our programme's remit. But what we've also done is to develop a suite of other tools where if it doesn't fit within the EIP, we're able to respond with agility through other means. Some of the work that we're doing on the economic security side, for example, not quite economic integration as I would see it in terms of the development priorities that we have for ASEAN so we would use other tools to do that.

Denis: I used to work at APEC and Asian Development Bank, and we've also developed a lot of programmes, including technical assistance and capacity building programmes. But you and I know the hardest part are often about impact and how do you assess whether these different kinds of programmes or initiatives are making a real difference. Are there any particular indicators that you look at to measure whether you're making an impact on your projects?

Kenn: It’s a really good question and I think it's probably one that I'm thinking about with the team at the moment as we're going towards the second year of this programme. The way we do that, Denis, and as you know through programming is having a really rigorous set of programming tools to keep us honest and transparent. And so, there are two that I would always point to. One involves what we call the theory of change. So, this is effectively a logic framework of how the activities or the things that we're doing on the ground are going to lead to impacts. The first thing we need to do is be able to tell that story. How does that activity solve the problem and lead to that impact? Once you've got that story, the next thing we need to do is hold ourselves to account, and our delivery partners that we're working with accountable. So, we need a, what we call the results framework for that, which is effectively a set of indicators, as you say, our KPIs to make sure that we put those against each of the stages of the theory of change. To answer your question on impact for the EIP, there's three areas within our theory of change that we are aiming to deliver at the impact level. The first is around regional integration. Our KPIs in this instance are about reducing trade barriers and improve intra-ASEAN trade. So that's quite an ambitious target given where we're seeing intra-ASEAN trade stabilising over recent years. We're hoping that our work will contribute to that in a three to five-year time horizon. The other will be around harmonised regulatory standards, which will also help us to support inclusive growth. So, we should be seeing expanded financial inclusion of MSMEs and women entrepreneurs. We're expecting that to follow through. We are also expecting to see more digital trade systems being modernised and a growth in AI and digital finance because they are also activities that we're supporting in that space. And finally, through all of that, we hope that it will lead to more resilient and future-ready economies as a result of our work.

But just to say a little bit, we're only two years into the programme, so I think it's really important that we're probably not able to see those impact level indicators at the moment coming through. But I'll hold ourselves to account in a few years' time for sure. But some of the outcomes that we've already seen changing, some of those shorter-term implications of our work, are starting to bear fruit right now. We're already seeing some of our work on the regulatory reform side come through. Indonesia as a government now has adopted regulatory impact assessments as a process. We've got, new guidelines endorsed on consumer protection standards at the ASEAN level. We are rolling out AI and digital literacy toolkits in certain countries. We are helping to socialise some of the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) upgrade in some countries so that ASEAN businesses are really aware of the latest updates in trade agreements and they can harness those benefits. And so, there's a whole host of things that are already bearing fruit, but we've still got a little bit of time to wait and see.

Denis: So, related to my question on policy impact, what does effective cooperation with the ASEAN Secretariat look like, especially when you're trying to translate some of these very broad economic integration goals into concrete projects?

Kenn: I would say around effective cooperation, it's often based on three things that I see on a day-to-day basis working with the ASEAN secretariat. The first is ensuring that we are listening to what ASEAN wants and is trying to achieve. And so, supporting that where the UK has a common goal and something to offer, I think that's really important. The starting point should always be to listen. The second is being patient. Things don't happen overnight with ASEAN, and it's partly because of that collective action and the need to work together and come together on the common denominator. So, it's about being patient as well, and giving ASEAN the space to react, respond, and propose something back to us. But then the flip side of that is also working with agility. So, we need to be ready, as the UK, to be able to respond quickly to these requests and seize those opportunities. But just a brief point in the sort of on the translation of goals into a concrete action, I think, this is something that I hope member state governments that we're working with through the EIP are hopefully seeing as we think about delivering on the ground. So, the EIP really is an innovative model where we're working with the ASEAN sectoral bodies and ASEAN Secretariat to agree in-country implementation pilots. So, what we're saying is that we have got the agreement of the policy, now let's pilot in AMS (AMS). And that's what I think is so unique about our programme is that we're trying to move away from policy development here. We've got quite a lot of policies at the ASEAN level, as you know, and we've talked about on several occasions Denis, but it's really about how do we ensure that we're focusing the programme on pilots and in-country delivery, where we can then learn from those pilots and then scale up regionally. So that's how we are thinking through the programme to ensure that we're having concrete impact.

Denis: It's probably an unfair question because honestly, the onus on responsibility in translating these economic goals to concrete projects lies with national governments, with the ASEAN member states (AMS) and of course with the ASEAN Secretariat. Let's talk geo-economics. I think the FCDO has supported ASEAN's work around the ASEAN Geoeconomics Task Force last year, and the ASEAN Geoeconomics Report 2025 was released, I think, sometime late last year as well. Can you maybe elaborate on how the UK and FCDO was involved in this project and why is this such an important area for UK-ASEAN cooperation?

Kenn: Thanks, Denis. I think maybe if I could start with answering your second question first, because I think it's really important to explain to your listeners why the UK really cares about this. And so, I think it, we'll start there and it's really about working with the region and with ASEAN. For us, the UK, as a crucial imperative to achieving our mutual goals because the global challenges that we're facing together, including on climate, but in this instance, economic security, they really require global solutions. By working in collaboration with our close partners like ASEAN, and with AMS bilaterally, it ensures that we can develop these solutions that are fit-for-purpose. And the UK supports ASEAN's vision and its central role in achieving peace and security in its region because for us it's a really important objective for the UK [as well] because economics and trade also require political security as well. As we see it, what happens on our continents impacts this region, and vice versa. That is what we mean when we say our region's security and prosperity are inseparable, and that's why it's so important for us to be working on issues like economic security with ASEAN and AMS.

But just on your first question, on the ASEAN Geoeconomics Report and the support to the task force, the UK helped to provide technical assistance and helped inform ASEAN's horizon-scanning capabilities—what are the risks that are coming up, how to think through that, and organise that thinking? It was also an opportunity for the UK to help support through economic modelling assistance as well as in scenario analyses. But really importantly, and a key part of our work is also about engaging and facilitating consultation with businesses and academia with colleagues like youself. And so, part of that support was also about ensuring that we were able to facilitate surveys and roundtables with both of these communities to ensure their voices were heard and they were inputting into recommendations that ASEAN was effectively developing. And then finally, through our inaugural ASEAN-UK analytical dialogue, the UK's FCDO, Deputy Chief Economist, Fergus Cumming, also worked with the ASEAN Secretariat to share insights on analytical tools that we are developing as the UK to help identify and prioritise geoeconomic risks. So, it's really in the space of thinking through how we can support and share knowledge on geoeconomic risks so that we can help to enhance our ability to mitigate them.

And just a final point, and also you will hear it here first Denis, we are also really excited that we are able to replicate and extend that collaboration this year. Because I am delighted to say that our Chief Economist, Dennis Novy, will be coming back to ASEAN and this region to jointly hold another analytical dialogue on geoeconomic risks and opportunities this year. So, we are delighted to tell you that first, here on your podcast.

Denis: Sounds good, thanks for the heads up! I thought the geoeconomics report was pretty good. It was very hard-hitting policy recommendations to meet some of the emerging economic, geoeconomic challenges that the region face. It is not business as usual in ASEAN. But you and I know that one of the biggest problems in the region has always been on implementation and that sort of huge implementation gap that still exists in the region. What do you think should happen next after the ASEAN geoeconomics report? We've got all these recommendations, so what are they doing? What is the secretariat or ASEAN doing about that?

Kenn: Yes, I think, it's a fair question Denis, and I completely agree with your statement about the biggest challenge being implementation. I hope that what I'm saying just around the economic integration programme is a clear example of how serious the UK takes on implementation and how focused the UK is on ensuring that we are supporting that.

In this context of geoeconomics or geoeconomic security, I would just say that we also, as I was saying earlier, need to be a little bit patient with ASEAN. Kudos to them for having moved really relatively quickly from an ASEAN standpoint to deliver this really informative report. I think it, it took them six months to do that, and that's quite a short space of time to really have pulled that together. I think that in and of itself that should be an indicator of how important this issue is and how ASEAN is trying to move quickly on it. But let's be a little bit more patient. I think from my perspective though, and the thinking through the recommendations as well as more recent events, since the report was written, such as the war in the Middle East, I think the areas that we should all be considering, including ASEAN and the UK, is our ability to identify, manage, and mitigate future economic shocks. And increasingly, multiple shocks simultaneously. Something that we think about in the UK is how do we deal with polycrisis? I think, in broad terms, what we're all facing and where there is an opportunity to work with ASEAN going forward, is how do we horizon scan and work together on that? How do we work together on crisis management? And how do we work together on scenario planning? I think these are the areas for opportunity and the sort of next steps that ASEAN really faces and the potential for UK collaboration.

Denis: Yes, talking about polycrisis and crisis management, I believe that economic security is becoming a pretty prominent topic that's being discussed, both in the region and globally. And I think it's also been discussed and touched on in the Geoeconomics Report. How do you understand economic security, particularly in the Southeast Asian context? Is it about supply chain disruptions, or strategic hedging? What's your key focus when you look at economic security in Southeast Asia?

Kenn: Well, Denis, I'd probably ask them to read your book. Your recent book. I think that would be a good starting point, in terms of getting a sense of how the region thinks about economic security. But if I may also start with how the UK is approaching economic security, because it helps us to think about then what are those common challenges are with Southeast Asia. For us, as the UK, the main mission is to secure and resilient growth. To achieve that, the government thinks about economic security through three objectives. It's about promoting where we can through new trade agreements, such as those with India and South Korea. It's about protecting where we must through some of the tools that we have, such as investment screening and our new procurement act, but it's also about partnering with businesses and like-minded governments to produce a more secure trading environment. So that's how the UK is thinking about the issue of economic security.

In terms of the Southeast Asian context, I'd like to go back to those principles that I set out before, which is always about listening first, and this is why the geoeconomics report is so important. Because, as you say, there's some great recommendations in there. But it also helped us, for the UK, but for other partners too, to understand the challenges that ASEAN collectively have identified. And just to recap what those were, there were three. The first was around economic fragmentation, so thinking through rising use of, tariffs and subsidies, and other tools of economic statecraft. The risk here is that ASEAN is going to face a more complex, costly, and politically driven trading system. The second was around economic reconfiguration of economic blocs, so where the global economy is increasingly organised into competing blocs. The risk for ASEAN here is around strategic pressure to align, or compete, or indeed differentiate across the blocs. And the third was around industrial overcapacity and export surges. So really, this is about subsidised overproduction. The risk for ASEAN here is around becoming a dumping ground for excess global capacity rather than a value-adding hub. I think we've got to listen to those areas and think about solutions and supporting the recommendations to address those.

But finally, just to say, we also can't ignore the impacts of the more recent and ongoing war in the Middle East and the implications to the region. As you know, Denis, and from our conversations, Southeast Asian economies are highly trade-dependent, globally integrated, and really vulnerable to this energy price shock. So, as a result, what I'm hearing from this region is also a focus on energy and food security action. And personally, I don't define that as economic security, but they're critical, nonetheless.

Denis: Thanks for plugging our book, Kenn. And that's a special issue that was published in Contemporary Southeast Asia, where we tried to revisit economic security in Southeast Asia, particularly ASEAN’s approach to economic security and whether it was still fit for purpose. Let's talk about UK-ASEAN cooperation. ASEAN has a lot of dialogue partners, so what does the UK bring to the table as an economic partner to ASEAN? What's the UK's comparative advantage compared to other dialogue partners?

Kenn: It’s great to be answering that question, hot on the heels of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting last week Denis, where the UK and ASEAN announced our new plan of action together, paving the way for deepening cooperation. I also think having our foreign secretary prioritise that event, 48 hours after just being appointed as part of the new cabinet; I think it really speaks volumes to how important the ASEAN relationship with the UK is for this UK government. But back to your question, humbly speaking, I believe that the UK's contribution can really be characterised sort of three facets. I think the first of those is being a credible, neutral partner that listens. I hope this emphasis on listening is heard loud and clear, because I think that's a really important part of how we operate genuinely, to listen to the needs, to listen to the positions and the priorities of ASEAN. The second is our ability to convene and bring together the right people, not just other governments, but also the voices from other really important stakeholders, including our academic community, our business community, and other parties. And then third, I would say it's our technical and policy expertise in specific areas. That would be in areas such as the areas that we're working on through the EIP, such as regulatory excellence, financial services, digital trade, and AI. So that's where it's, I would say our contribution would be.

Denis: So, what would you think would be some of these promising opportunities for UK-ASEAN cooperation? Is it in digitalisation, green transitions, maybe bringing the private sector, both UK and ASEAN businesses together to collaborate on different types of projects? What would you think are some of the promising opportunities over the next, twelve to twenty-four months?

Kenn: Yes, I think, you touched on digital and green cooperation, and these are two of the three Ds that I mentioned, together with defence. Let me just take digital angle. The UK's already working really closely with ASEAN to support on digital training, digital data standards, cybersecurity, and responsible technology adoption. That's a really important part. Just recently, through the EIP, but also through other tools that we have with the UK, we've been supporting ASEAN member state readiness for the implementation of the new Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA). We launched a new trade tech lookbook for ASEAN, which is effectively directly supporting ASEAN's digital integration by providing solutions from UK firms, in the trade tech space. That's another really important initiative. And then more recently, we've been producing a digital trade toolkit actually designed for MSMEs specifically to support digital integration of their business practices and operations. That's on the digital side, and we are planning to do more as the DEFA implementation becomes an increasingly important agenda item for ASEAN.

But beyond digitalisation, just to talk a little bit more on the sort of decarbonisation and green side. Because we're also very active in this space, and so maybe a few areas that my colleagues on the green economy side are working on. So, we're partnering already with UN ESCAP, to identify investment-ready projects in renewable energies and energy efficient projects, to attract foreign direct investment. We're also working, and have worked with ASEAN through Malaysia's ASEAN Chair recently. And maybe I'll just pick up on one area of carbon neutrality. So, we've been working with the UN Sustainable Energy to unlock financing for clean energy technologies. There are a whole host of things that we could talk about, so I'll probably stop there if, if that's okay.

Denis: You also work very closely with the private sector. So how can the UK and ASEAN better connect their businesses with investors and also the policy communities? What sort of activities have you done to bring them together?

Kenn: Yes, it's a really great point, and one that I'm really passionate about and I'll continue to challenge our team to make sure we're thinking about what the business community, what the policy community at-large is also telling us. Just to start with though, I would say that we've already got great examples of where the UK and ASEAN are working together to bring these voices into the mix. First of all, that would be through set pieces through initiatives like the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit that happened. I think that was really important. We also have the UK-ASEAN Business Council, one of our key mechanisms to ensure the business voice is present and accounted for. So, I think those set pieces are really important. But in addition to that, it's also through active consultation and participation of our business and policy communities, in work such as, for example, our academics and think tanks workshop on geoeconomic risks, and through also our geoeconomics business surveys and roundtable consultations. Another few examples of where, more at the sort of working level and the sort of think pieces that we've been doing are also one. But I would say that I think then there is more that can be done, in this space, and I think it's around how we become more systematic about that engagement in everything we do. I think that's the growth area.

Yeah, and in terms of some of the sectors and sorts of areas where UK firms and partners, are looking to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN I think it would be guided really by our UK industrial strategy where we have our eight priority sectors. I've talked to you about the three Ds, which we see are the, the critical nodes for this region. I think what you'll see is a deepening of UK partnership in the areas of decarbonisation, digital, and defence.

Denis: If we look, let's look ahead three to five years from now, and, what would success look like for UK-ASEAN economic cooperation? And what would you like to see achieved through FCDO's work? I guess it's your KPIs for the next couple years. And maybe final question related to this, looking ahead, if you had to identify one area, where the UK can make the most meaningful contribution to ASEAN, what would that be?

Kenn: Wow, that's quite a big question. I would say my KPIs for the next, next three to five years, I think for the programme, we have that guidance and we've got the guardrails there. So just to go back to what the EIP will hopefully deliver, it's about reducing those trade barriers. It's about harmonising those standards. It's about ensuring that we've expanded the financial inclusion of the financial services sector and that we are enhancing digital trade. And so, there is KPIs for us on that side of the house. But in terms of the broader economic relationship, I think it has to be enhancing mutual prosperity that is also secure and resilient, as we've talked about. So, that's not just growth, but secured and resilient growth. I think the KPIs of that would be that we would have increased UK-ASEAN trade and investment, as a result of deeper partnerships, either through existing structures like CPTPP or the UK-Singapore FTA but also through other partnerships like the new digital trade partnerships, for example. I think the other KPI would also be that our UK and ASEAN firms, and economies as a whole are more resilient to shocks. So, I think that's the sort of resilient and secure side of the picture.

But on your question, which is probably the hardest of all. Tough one, tough question. But I'd have to say, as a personal reflection. I think the UK's most meaningful contribution really, is to remain a reliable and trusted, partner to ASEAN. And I say that because I think at a time of significant unpredictability, we need that reliability and then in terms of a partner that is listening, always listening and remaining honest to ASEAN, I think that's so critical because everything else really flows from that economic partnership, the sociocultural partnership, the political partnership.

Denis: Kenn, thanks so much for joining us and for sharing your insights on the UK's economic and trade engagement in Southeast Asia. It's been a very useful to hear how FCDO is working with ASEAN, the ASEAN Secretariat, as well as a lot of partners to support trade, economic integration, and resilience at a time of growing geoeconomic uncertainty.

To our listeners, thank you for tuning in to this episode of ASEAN in Practice. Do join us again for more conversations with policymakers, practitioners, and scholars working on Southeast Asia. Stay tuned. Thank you.

***The podcast episode was recorded on July 29, 2026.**