



Counterpoint Southeast Asia

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Does the ASEAN-EU Partnership Play a Pivotal Role in Sustaining Multilateralism?

By Barbora Valockova

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU) have been dialogue partners since 1977 and strategic partners since December 2022. They have regularly reaffirmed that they are crucial allies in reinforcing rules-based multilateralism which they believe has been key in the promotion of peace and stability post-World War II. At the opening ceremony of the EU-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in December 2022, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, restated that “[b]oth the European Union and ASEAN have multilateralism in our DNA.”

However, multilateralism has undergone profound

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Counterpoint Southeast Asia is published regularly by the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It seeks to answer major questions of strategic significance for Southeast Asia by bringing in diverse voices from around the region. Each issue will tackle one question from three different perspectives.

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cont'd p2

changes. Scholars and analysts have come up with concepts such as diminished multilateralism, competitive multilateralism, contested multilateralism, and highlighted that multilateralism faces several crises such as a crisis of relevance. They argue that international organisations are struggling to resolve both long-standing problems and emerging threats. In addition, the emergence of ad hoc minilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific and their exclusive nature has shown a trend away from multilateralism. On top of that, the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Hamas war, and the US-China strategic rivalry further suggest that multilateralism may be eroding.

In this context, effective and sustainable multilateralism and free and fair trade, have remained the foundations of the EU-ASEAN relationship. The EU is ASEAN's third-largest trading partner and source of foreign direct investment (FDI). It is also the preferred and trusted third party in hedging against the uncertainties of US-China rivalry and in commitment to "doing the right thing" in the broader interests of the global community, according to the annual [**State of Southeast Asia Survey**](#).

Having said that, while Southeast Asia's [**level of trust**](#) towards the EU remains high, in 2024 it was at its lowest level since the EU launched its Indo-Pacific Strategy. One reason for this is probably the [**"ambition disconnect"**](#) between the EU's and ASEAN's policy preferences. For instance, the EU's regulation on deforestation-free products is perceived

by several ASEAN member states as unilateral and unrealistic, and disproportionately disadvantaging smaller farmers over large companies. Therefore, while the EU has a free trade agreement (FTA) with Singapore and Vietnam, with discussions at various stages with other ASEAN member states, the EU-ASEAN inter-regional FTA has faced setbacks since 2007.

Given this background, it is necessary to discuss a fundamental question: Does the ASEAN-EU partnership play a pivotal role in sustaining multilateralism? Specifically, what are the main challenges and opportunities for ASEAN and the EU to forge a closer collaboration and reimagine what their partnership could look like in areas of common interest while upholding the multilateral global order? To address these questions, the Centre on Asia and Globalisation (CAG) invited three analysts for its 11th Counterpoint Southeast Asia (CSA) public webinar on 11 June 2024: Yeo Lay Hwee (Singapore Institute of International Affairs; ASEAN Chamber of Commerce-EU), Matteo Piasentini (University of the Philippines Diliman), and Aniello Iannone (Airlangga University; Diponegoro University).

Yeo Lay Hwee introduces the concept of a multilateral polarity and argues that ASEAN and the EU should work together to promote their agency and a new approach toward cooperation and competition in a fragmented world. However, instead of relying on raw power, each pole should be conceived around

a functional area of concern, such as a “Climate Pole,” and non-state actors should also be involved in the process of designing rules and norms to ensure the proper functioning of each pole.

Matteo Piasentini contends that while there is normative convergence between the EU and ASEAN in the maritime domain, there is also an implementation gap. Both sides have sought to bridge this implementation gap through improved bilateral cooperation. However, this combination of normative convergence and practical cooperation is mutually supportive. It helps build trust and preserves the rules-based order by upholding the freedom of navigation.

Lastly, **Aniello Iannone** delves into the area of democracy and human rights. He points out that despite having diverging priorities and political systems, ASEAN and the EU should focus on stronger cooperation and commitment to dialogue, and should also involve non-state actors, such as civil societies. Such cooperation would allow them to support a pragmatic form of multilateralism by co-creating an agenda and discussing shared values and concerns.

A key takeaway from this issue of CSA is that looking forward, amidst the geopolitical tensions and crises, a concerted EU-ASEAN effort has the potential to offer a new paradigm for multilateral cooperation and shape the discourse in global governance by helping to bridge the Western and Global South perspectives. This could be accomplished through more high-level

exchanges and visits between ASEAN and the EU, deeper multi-stakeholder engagement involving non-state actors such as big high-tech companies and civil societies, improved communication, co-designing of rules, and creative solutions to enhance dialogue on global functional areas of concern. Such practical ways may be necessary to turn remaining disagreements into cooperative platforms that support multilateralism.

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The EU, ASEAN and the Need to Work towards a Multilateral Rules-Based Polarity

By Yeo Lay Hwee

The EU and ASEAN should work in concert to push forward the idea of marrying multilateralism with a multipolarity based on poles organised around functional areas of concern.

The European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has a longstanding dialogue partnership beginning in 1977. Driven by the diffusion of power and new trends of contestation and weaponised interdependence exacerbated by the increasing rivalry between the US and China, the two regional blocs saw the necessity to upgrade their relations to a strategic partnership in December 2020 to strengthen their own agency and autonomy in an increasingly complex and contested world. The EU and ASEAN were determined to counter the assertiveness of Xi's China and the unpredictability of a US under Trump. As the latter in its "America First" policy worked to undermine the multilateral system painstakingly built up in the post-Cold war era, the EU and ASEAN reiterated their support for a multilateral, rules-based order.

The EU in its own internal working and institutional set-up has often championed multilateralism as the way to manage complex interdependence. ASEAN also prides itself as a



normative institution that cherished the principle of sovereign equality, non-interference, and the centrality of peace. How will these two regional blocs with their institutional and normative differences translate their strategic partnership to mutually beneficial strategic outcomes of sustaining a functioning multilateral world order?

From Multilateralism to Multipolarity?

Both the EU and ASEAN have benefitted greatly from a multilateral rules-based order governing economic relations and informing political and security dialogue. ASEAN and the EU have both enlarged and deepened their integration during this period of relative peace and stability and economic openness in the post-Cold War era. The end of the Cold War ushered in a period of optimism in multilateralism as a pathway towards global governance and a rules-based order.

The strategic partnership between the EU and ASEAN forged in 2020 came at a time when this rules-based order is coming under intense pressure and threat. The increasing assertiveness of a rising China, the transactional America First policy unleashed by the Trump administration and a series of crises—the financial and debt crises, the rise of far-right populist and extreme nationalist parties, etc.—all collide to create a volatile and unpredictable world increasingly ruled by more devious and aggressive behaviour rather than predictable norms and rules.

The retrenchment of the US from its support of the rules-based order and the increasing challenge from the rise of the rest—China, Russia, India and various non-state actors—call for a serious review of how multilateralism can be re-imagined and revitalised to engender needed transnational cooperation to address common challenges.

The EU, built on multilateral principles, is a strong proponent of a rules-based international order. ASEAN, an inter-governmental organisation of developing economies, is also an important beneficiary of the rules-based globalised order. The ASEAN economies, by integrating themselves into the global supply chains and participating actively in the global trading order, were able to deliver growth and development for its population. By 2023, the ASEAN economies collectively represented the sixth largest economy in the world, after US, China, EU, Japan, and India. Both blocs should therefore be leading the charge in thinking of how to

sustain a multilateral rules-based order.

As the post-Cold War world shifts from unipolarity towards multipolarity, multilateral principles become ever more important to help us navigate the increasingly connected, complex and contested world. We need new thinking to organise our multipolar world—not one that is based on the old idea of different poles with their spheres of influence based on raw power and ideological hegemony. Instead, we should be thinking of a multipolar world organised around the concept of multilateral polarity.

Towards Multilateral Polarity

The 18th or 19th century conception of “poles” in a multipolar Europe is based on the realist conception of a pole held up by its “might” and with a distinct sphere of influence—an empire of sorts. A grand bargain between these poles (empires) can result in a sort of balance of power that provides a degree of stability. However, in our 21st century world where power is much more diffused and decentralised and where non-state actors—such as big tech companies, terrorist organisations—can have great impact on geo-politics and geo-economics, the “poles” in the multipolar world need to be re-imagined. We are also living in a multipolar world that is globalised with complex networks and is much more interdependent and inter-connected.

As the EU seeks to affirm its strategic autonomy and ASEAN seeks to retain its

centrality in response to the downward spiral in US-China relations and increasing pressures from these two superpowers to impose a false binary choice on the rest of the world, it is ever more important that the EU and ASEAN work together to expand their agency and imagine a different approach toward cooperation and competition in this fractious world. Failure of the two blocs to act in concert, and to work with other like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific and the Global South risk a descend of the world into constant chaos and conflict.

One way that the EU and ASEAN can work together is to push forward the idea of marrying multipolarity with multilateralism. Instead of conceiving poles around the concept of raw power, we should have a multipolarity based on poles organised around functional areas of concern. And within these poles whether it is the “Digital Pole,” “Climate Pole” or otherwise, efforts should be made to involve not just state but also consequential non-state actors to come together to design rules and norms that will ensure the proper functioning of these poles. This is what multilateral (rules-based) polarity means and is a framework for both cooperation and competition that the EU and ASEAN should work towards.

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Guest Column

The EU-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation: Sailing Together to Different Courses?

By Matteo Piasentini

The EU's and ASEAN's approach to maritime cooperation converge on a normative level while facing an implementation gap that is bridged by bilateral cooperation between the EU and ASEAN member states.

Over the last decade, maritime geopolitical tensions have threatened peace and stability in Asia and the Pacific. Along with instability in the Taiwan Strait, tensions arising from territorial disputes between the People's Republic of China and Southeast Asian littoral states over sovereignty of islands and maritime areas in the South China Sea pose threats that are hardly confined to the region. The increasing competition between the United States and China has led to the re-imagining of the area, now called the “Indo-Pacific,” a geopolitical construct that links security, economics, and diplomacy. Maritime security is crucial in upholding the current regional state of affairs, catching the attention of both regional and extra-regional actors like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU).

Enhanced Cooperation to Promote Maritime Security

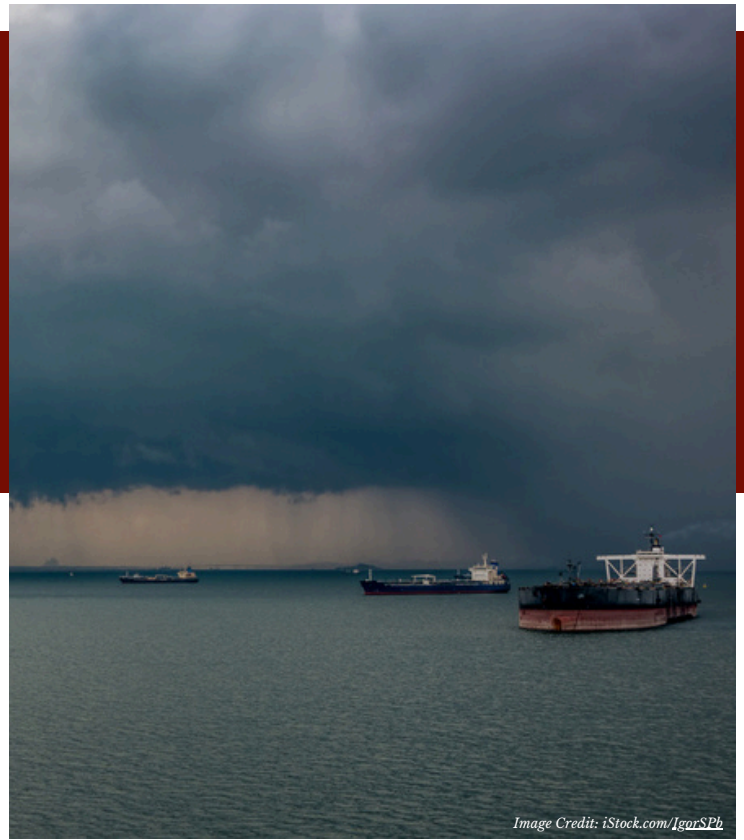


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The EU has progressively adopted the “**Indo-Pacific**” concept and is concerned about the material threat of disruption to the sea lines of communication (SLOC) that facilitate trade between the two continents. To avoid such a scenario, the EU views upholding a “Rules-Based International Order” as fundamental to ensuring freedom and openness in the region, in a system that guarantees the basic rights of freedom of navigation as stated by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The EU's position on maritime affairs is aimed at upholding international law and sees cooperation between regional entities as essential to strengthening the normative base of such a system. For this reason, the EU has intensified its ties with ASEAN in this domain. In addition to the ongoing dialogue on maritime security cooperation since 2013, the EU has actively engaged with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in discussions and

workshops on how to strengthen cooperation in maritime security, particularly when facing **non-traditional security threats** at sea, such as piracy, drug and human trafficking, and trade of arms.

Normative Convergence and Implementation Gap

The sequence of interactions at the official level between EU and ASEAN officials has led to a normative convergence, as both institutions appear to have embraced the necessity of strengthening maritime cooperation to address common challenges at sea. In 2023, ASEAN adopted the “**ASEAN Maritime Outlook**” (AMO), and concurrently, the EU updated its “**Maritime Security Strategy**,” with cooperation appearing central to both institutions’ maritime agendas. However, there are intrinsic points of divergence between the two entities that have generated different outcomes in recent times.

On the ASEAN side, the principles of the “ASEAN way,” such as non-intervention and decision-making by consensus, have confined the AMO to a programmatic document, emphasising the amicable settlement of disputes and divisions through cooperation and dialogue, with a clear non-confrontational stance. This is consistent with ASEAN’s traditional focus on inclusivity and the socialisation of a broad range of actors to ensure stability.

Conversely, the EU’s Maritime Security Strategy sets clearer and more ambitious targets. Cooperation is aimed at materially

strengthening the maritime capabilities of regional key actors, ultimately granting stability and pursuing the EU’s interests. The strategy involves enhancing naval activities, deepening international cooperation, improving maritime surveillance, managing maritime risks, boosting defense capabilities, and advancing security training.

Therefore, the hiatus in what can be considered “maritime cooperation” by the two actors, although congruent on a normative level, is evident on a policy implementation level. While ASEAN focuses on dialogue, the EU has set more ambitious and muscular goals to materially prevent an irreversible decay of the rules of maritime international law like UNCLOS, formed through active and decade-long multilateral negotiations.

It is not surprising, then, that the EU has recently deepened its maritime security dialogue with key ASEAN states like Vietnam and the Philippines, whose vessels and personnel are regularly involved in incidents with Chinese maritime militias and law enforcement authorities in the South China Sea. In this regard, the EU has established a “**subcommittee on maritime cooperation**” with the Philippines and commenced a series of **roundtables** on maritime security with Vietnam.

Conclusion

The agency of regional organisations in upholding multilateralism in the maritime domain converges on a normative level and

diverges on a policy level. While the EU and ASEAN share a common vision of upholding the rules of UNCLOS at sea and have intensified their dialogue on practices and cooperation for addressing non-traditional security threats, the EU, in this phase, seems to bypass ASEAN centrality by seeking bilateral partnerships in this field, touching on “hard security” with some ASEAN member states. Surely, ASEAN woes in coordinating a cohesive response to the South China Sea issue push these states to seek bilateral cooperation with other actors like the EU. But at the same time, the normative alignment between the EU and ASEAN shapes the ways through which such bilateral implementation is conducted.

It is still unclear whether an increased EU role in maritime security will end up undermining ASEAN centrality. At this juncture, the opposite seems true: the EU actively sustains regional norms by overcoming the paralysis of ASEAN collective action through tailored policies, in a context that remains inclusive, aimed at cooperation and not antagonistic. Such a form of normative inter-regionalism and practical bilateralism seems mutually supportive and trust-building, which may help lay a foundation for a renewed multilateral governance.

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Forging Paths: Enhancing Democracy and Human Rights Cooperation between the EU and ASEAN

By Aniello Iannone

The sensitive agenda of democracy and human rights has not been a main priority of ASEAN-EU relations. However, greater dialogue and coordination as equals in this field would allow them to forge a pragmatic form of multilateralism.

From a structural and ideological perspective, the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can be considered almost as opposites. The EU, founded and built in the post-war period, places integration as a fundamental principle, while ASEAN, born during the Cold War as a third bloc compared to the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), emphasises national sovereignty and independence. ASEAN has developed a regional order concept based on the **ASEAN Way**, which promotes the protection of national and regional **identities** and is based on **norms reflecting** these collective identities.

As such, one of the major points of contention between the EU and ASEAN concerns human rights and democracy. The EU has always considered human rights and democracy as fundamental pillars of its integration process. Conversely, ASEAN has struggled to adopt a similar approach due to



Image Credit: [European Union](#)

its intrinsic nature of promoting national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. **Scholars have pointed out** that the EU considers human rights in a universal way, while ASEAN interprets them in a more contextual and regional manner.

These significant differences in the interpretation and implementation of human rights and democracy influence the political relations between the EU and ASEAN. ASEAN's principle of non-interference, national sovereignty, and its varied political systems contrast sharply with the EU's universal view of human rights and democratic principles and its more interventionist approach to these issues. Added to these discrepancies are the EU's and ASEAN's own internal democratic and human rights challenges.

Democratic and Human Rights Challenges in ASEAN and the EU

ASEAN has long been criticised by many international observers for its approach to human rights. In particular, concerning the role of the **ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights** (AICHR) and its task of protecting human rights, **ASEAN falls short compared to its EU counterpart**. Without overlooking the human rights issues in Europe, which have been **on the rise**, ASEAN's slow progress has been evident on several occasions, especially in the **Myanmar crisis following the 2021 coup**. Besides the **Five-Point Consensus**, ASEAN has not made a clear decision on how to proceed further to resolve the Myanmar crisis.

Looking within ASEAN, dynastic politics in the Philippines and Indonesia, authoritarianism in Myanmar, and political issues in Thailand mean that leaders may prioritise economic performance and **arbitrariness and contingency over rules-based multilateral governance**. These dynamics are accentuated by the growing geopolitical and geoeconomic rivalry between China and the US in the Indo-Pacific, which has influenced the internal and external policies of both regions, further complicating cooperation on democratic and human rights issues.

From a democratic standpoint, the EU also faces significant challenges related to democratic backsliding, particularly due to the continuous rise of right-wing populist nationalism. In some **EU countries, the return of populist right-wing politics**—with protectionist policies and authoritarian regulations concerning freedom of expression

—has undermined the fundamental democratic principles.

Challenges as Opportunities for a More Extensive Collaboration

The rise of nationalist right-wing movements in Europe and authoritarianism and autocracies in ASEAN both have the potential to erode multilateralism by slowly replacing it with more inward-looking and restrictive initiatives. Furthermore, the Russo-Ukrainian and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, as well as China's pressure on ASEAN in relation to the Taiwan issue and the South China Sea, have tested the EU's and ASEAN's commitment to multilateralism.

However, despite their differences, regional challenges, and an increasingly contested geopolitical context, the EU and ASEAN have continued to collaborate, seeking to find a balance between their respective visions and principles. Indeed, the partnership provides a platform for dialogue and the exchange of best practices, which has the potential to lead to gradual improvements in human rights and democratic governance in both ASEAN and the EU.

Looking ahead, there are opportunities to make the cooperation between ASEAN and the EU more effective. For instance, they could use their existing ties to include civil societies from both regions, perhaps in the form of **a high-profile EU-ASEAN civic forum**. Such an engagement could help expand the discussion on democratic and human rights issues by exchanging local

viewpoints on the democratisation process. Furthermore, it could also contribute to Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations and task forces, such as **the joint task force** to strengthen cooperation for the implementation of the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) between the European Commission, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Inviting environmental groups and indigenous communities to those meetings

would ensure that those affected by deforestation are represented and that any data gaps are addressed.

Conclusion

The EU and ASEAN have diverging priorities in human rights and democracy. The EU is considered a normative superpower, while countries in Southeast Asia have different political systems, which presents practical constraints in complying with the EU's normative vision. Therefore, a stronger cooperation and a constant commitment to dialogue in this field, alongside the economic and security fields, are important as it will enable the two organisations to better understand each other's constraints and pursue common interests as much as possible. The aim of the intensified dialogue should be to discuss and create together an agenda for upholding shared values as equal partners. This would bring lasting benefits to both organisations and help preserve multilateral approaches to common challenges, while avoiding accusations of imposing standards.

Such proactive coordination can serve as an example and forge the path for a pragmatic form of multilateralism that would allow countries to come together when needed despite frictions in some areas, and thus support global peace and security.

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