



Counterpoint Southeast Asia

A publication of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation



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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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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