

## 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

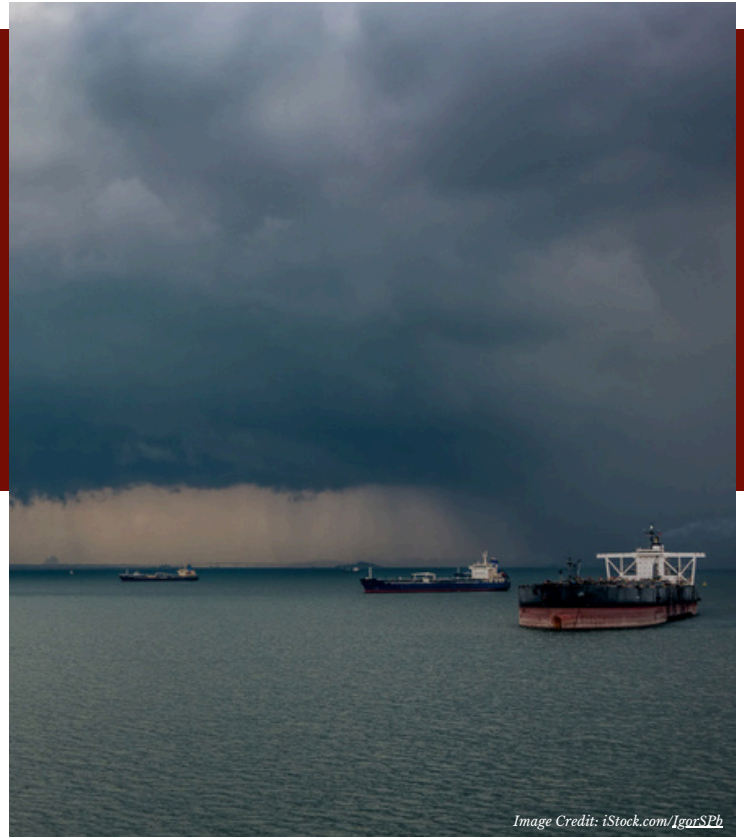


Image Credit: iStock.com/IgorSPb

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.

**Matteo Piasentini is a PhD Candidate and Senior Lecturer at the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman. He tweets at [@Piase91](https://twitter.com/Piase91).**