

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.

Yeo Lay Hwee is a Senior Fellow at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs and Vice-Chair of the ASEAN Chamber of Commerce-EU.