



EU-ASEAN Relations

Essay Series

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EU-ASEAN Strategic partnership: looking at the big picture

Six months after the historic decision to upgrade the EU-ASEAN Partnership to the “Strategic” level, which definitely is a welcome milestone after 44 years of intense and overall positive relationship, the big questions are: how to make a success of this new qualitative step, and what can be called a success?

We all know the starting point in terms of facts and figures, and they are striking: the EU and ASEAN together represent more than a billion people and almost 25% of global economic wealth. The EU is ASEAN’s second largest trade partner after China, and ASEAN as a whole is the EU’s third largest trade partner outside Europe, after the US and China.


The tragic pandemic that continues to affect billion of people around the world, including in Europe and Southeast Asia, has only reinforced our bonds, as both regions share a common interest in pursuing a multilateral approach to an affordable, fair and equitable access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines. The EU and its Member States notably are the world’s leading sponsors of the COVAX facility, at the benefit of a growing number of people in the ASEAN region, among others. ‘Team Europe’ has dedicated EU-assistance to South East Asia of EUR 800 million to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic in the region and to mitigate its socio-economic impact, with an additional EUR 20 million support of WHO activities in the region.

The policies and measures foreseen by the two parts in the context of the new strategic partnership are numerous and ambitious. Together, we will enhance our overall prosperity, promote our security, strengthen our resilience, and improve our connectivity. Together, we will facilitate a stronger economic cooperation, preserve peace and stability, make our connectivity more sustainable, and we will work tirelessly for a sustainable development, be it on human rights issues or on fighting against climate change and in favour of biodiversity.

This is a copious agenda and if, as I strongly believe, we are able to achieve most of it, we will have made steady progress. But beyond policies and measures, however positive they may be, the question remains: how to fundamentally make a success of this enhanced relationship and what can be called a genuine success, and for whom?

As Member of the European Parliament, my constituents ask me every day: what is in it for me? This is a more than legitimate question, and it also applies to any vital relationship, like the one between our regions, and ultimately between our people. In ten years’ time, our constituents in Europe and Southeast Asia must have no doubt that real progress has been made in deepening our relationship.

In its latest edition of the “State of Southeast Asia”, the Yusof Ishak Institute indicates that the EU and Japan are “the clear front-runners for ASEAN’s most favoured and trusted strategic partners in the hedging game against US-China rivalry”. It also states that the EU “comes in second place at 51% (after Japan at 67,1%) with many viewing the EU as a reliable champion on issues such as the rule of law, global governance, free trade, sustainability and climate change”.



To be honest, it would be difficult to find a similar study in the opposite direction, and this is only telling: there is not enough awareness and genuine interest towards our ASEAN counterparts in European public opinion.

It saddens me to say so, as it saddens me to acknowledge that the EU circles in Brussels, as well as most of our national capitals, are yet to demonstrate interest towards ASEAN, its Member States and its people in a way that they deserve. This is what has to change, and the result of this change will in my eyes be the real measure of the success of our new EU-ASEAN paradigm.

So, what do I propose for this to happen?

First, a strongly enhanced parliamentary relationship that will enable people to have their views taken on board, with buy-in on initiatives coming about in a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach.

The European Delegation for ASEAN, that I have the honour to chair, will soon co-host the bi-annual meeting of our new “Dialogue”, together with ASEAN MPs Members of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA). Our mutual intention is to gradually but intensely increase the quality and quantity of our exchanges, and possibly create, rather sooner than later, an EU-ASEAN Parliamentary Assembly, the first one for us in Asia.

Second, the creation of an EU-ASEAN network of think-tanks, foundations and universities, that would reflect and make proposals on the next phases of the relationship between our two regions, as well as on all topics that they would deem useful to a vibrant exchange of ideas and policies between us.

A number of other initiatives linking the Southeast Asian and European civil societies in their many aspects would also be crucial to reinforce the indispensable person-to-person dimension of the strategic partnership: organisations representing the trade sector of course - and this is a good opportunity for me to genuinely praise the great work of the EU-ASEAN Business Council and its partners in the EU and ASEAN -, but also actors in the field of women’s rights, students and young people, defence of fundamental rights etc...

To facilitate this effort, the European Parliament has decided to deploy a few of its officials to the region, as an additional sign of its determination to make of the renewed EU-ASEAN relationship one that matters more than ever.

To conclude, I cannot resist quoting former German chancellor Konrad Adenauer, one of the fathers of Europe, who said about the European integration process, “if the best solution cannot be achieved, then one must take the second or third best”. I may not be as wise as the chancellor, but as for the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership, I only wish for the best solution.