



# ***EU-ASEAN Relations***

## ***Essay Series***

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with the support





## The European Union and ASEAN – An ever closer partnership

An important geo-political shift is underway: The Indo-Pacific region is becoming the new global centre of gravity. The Indo-Pacific creates 60% of global GDP and two-thirds of global growth. It is the second largest destination for EU exports and home to four out of the EU's top ten trading partners. Around 40% of the EU's foreign trade passes through the South China Sea. The EU is also the top investor in and development assistance provider for the Indo-Pacific.

The adoption of an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in April this year was a response to this new reality. A visible and concrete signal of our enduring commitment to the Indo-Pacific region. I received a clear response to this signal during my recent visit to Jakarta and the ASEAN Secretariat: Our regional partners are seeking more cooperation and EU presence. The possibilities of what we can do together are extensive: from the pandemic and economic recovery, to connectivity and trade, from the green agenda to the key area of security.


The EU is a major development partner of ASEAN and the biggest donor to the ASEAN Secretariat, with over EUR 250 million of grant funding in support of ASEAN regional integration for the period 2014-2020. This comes in addition to over EUR 2 billion of bilateral support to ASEAN Member States. The EU is also ASEAN's third trade partner and investor. EU exports to ASEAN countries grew from EUR 54 billion in 2010 to EUR 85 billion in 2019 and our imports grew even more, from EUR 72 billion to EUR 125 billion.

What these numbers show is that the EU has a serious stake in this region, and what happens in Asia reverberates in Europe.

Notwithstanding the potential growth and development on the horizon, we must also face up to some ominous clouds. The order and balance of this region are increasingly riveted by growing tension and insecurity. This trend must be countered by firmly establishing stable and shared rules. That is why the EU can be counted upon, as a trusted and reliable partner, to speak up in defence of a regional order which is rules-based, free and open for all.

This trust stems from a strong shared history. The EU is, in fact, ASEAN's oldest Dialogue Partner, having established links in 1977. We are now the two most advanced regional integration schemes in the world and natural partners. In December last year, we formally launched our Strategic Partnership. We should have done so much earlier. The EU and ASEAN are the key defenders and proponents of rules-based multilateralism, because it is in our DNA: it is our daily reality and it is what makes our organisations work. But you cannot be multilateralist on your own. We have always been and will always be stronger when we act together.

The growing geo-political competition is another reason to pull together. Although this state of affairs is not in ASEAN's interest, it must deal with the world as it is, and avoid being pushed into a one-sided sphere of influence. Just like the EU, ASEAN aspires to strategic autonomy,



and the best way to achieve this is through ASEAN centrality, diversifying its partnerships and ensuring that ASEAN is the fulcrum for regional cooperation and consultation.

The EU Indo-Pacific strategy is clear in its support for ASEAN centrality, and equally clear in our desire to work with our partners to boost trade and investment, economic openness and a sustainable approach to connectivity in the region. In this context, the successful conclusion of the Comprehensive Air Transportation Agreement (CATA) will help rebuild air connectivity between ASEAN and Europe and open up new growth opportunities for the aviation industry in both regions. A much welcome development as we work to recover from the pandemic.

We do not only offer our very significant economic credentials, but the EU also has the capacity and will to play a stronger role on strategic and security issues, especially maritime security. We already have a dialogue with ASEAN on maritime security cooperation, and are currently extending our Critical Maritime Routes Programme, which strengthens regional maritime surveillance capacities from the Indian Ocean to South East Asia. We are also exploring options to enhance the EU's maritime presence in the vast Indo-Pacific space.

The EU is deeply concerned by the worsening 'democratic recession' which is on display across the globe, often linked with assaults on pluralism and political freedoms. This is most dramatically visible in Myanmar. We strongly support ASEAN's leadership and are prepared to back this up with concrete actions in terms of resources and political pressure. The Five-Point Consensus has not yet brought the hoped-for results in terms of either political dialogue or a clear reduction in violence. Our support is evidenced by the third round of sanctions to put all possible pressure on those military leaders, and their economic interests, who are responsible for the coup and the violence.

Our commitment to democratic rights and fundamental freedoms is deep. Not because we see these as European or Western constructs, but because we know these values and principles are universal. Many countries and certainly the citizens in this region share the EU's view: they want to determine their political future and have their rights protected.

The road ahead is clear: The EU is here to stay, side by side with ASEAN, working together on shared security, sustainable connectivity and global challenges. In all this, the EU and ASEAN are natural partners. Let us put the partnership to work.