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What Europe Day can mean for ASEAN

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THE late Irish writer Oscar Wilde once observed, “Most modern calendars mar the sweet simplicity of our lives by reminding us that each day that passes is the anniversary of some perfectly uninteresting event.”

‘Europe Day’, the anniversary on 9 May, marking — through the Treaty of Paris of 1950 — the creation of what is now known as the European Union (EU), may be overlooked in such a manner by most people across the world, including even some Europeans themselves.

There is a tendency to forget the impact of French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman’s declaration on 9 May 1950 calling France, Germany and other European countries to pool together their production of coal and steel as “the first concrete foundation of a European federation”. These were resources that dragged major European powers into two devastating World Wars.

It also facilitates the glossing over of the EU as it currently stands, even on the weight of demographics and economics alone. Consisting of 25 member states, with an area of 3.89 million square kilometres, and approximately 460 million citizens, the EU economy constitutes 20 percent of world trade at the value of €1.7 billion (\$3.3 billion). If the EU was a country, it would be the seventh largest in the world by area and the third largest by population after China and India.

The sheer economic strength and size of the EU obliges it towards shouldering global responsibilities. In addition to remembering and celebrating the EU’s achievements and aspirations as things in themselves, Europe Day should be an event highlighting the value of its external relations with the rest of the world, including the ten-nation ASEAN.

ASEAN-EU relations

Officially established through a 1980 Co-operation Agreement, the ASEAN-EU relationship represents the core of relations between Asia and Europe simply because of ASEAN’s relative capacity and cohesiveness in comparison to other regional bodies. The Association is the both the progenitor and driver behind various other regional initiatives such as the ASEAN+3 process, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM), and the East Asia Summit.

ASEAN also represents the closest undertaking towards regional integration after the

European and North American experience. With an area of 4.48 million square kilometres and population of 592 million people — ASEAN approximates the geographic and demographic dimensions of the EU.

ASEAN was established on 8 August 1967 — a date few Southeast Asians may remember or even realise as signifying ASEAN Day — through the signing of the Bangkok Declaration by its five original member countries. The then-Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Narciso Ramos spoke of the dangers of Southeast Asia's "fragmented economies" should they continue pursuing their own "limited objectives" and "conflicting endeavours". These are similar allegories to Minister Schuman's own words of a need for a "common economic system", a "deeper community" and his caution against the peril of "sanguinary divisions".

Notwithstanding an appreciation of the symbolic value of Europe Day among certain Asian diplomats and political elites, an explanation for absentia among Asian societies in general would probably involve the region's relatively vast geographical distance from Europe. The general sentiment among Europeans may be mutual, through a remark to this writer by an EU official in Brussels that Southeast Asia does not belong to Europe's "near abroad"; a geographical term that has little relevance in a globalised world.

The shared sense of dislocation can also be attributed to what another EU official described to the writer as the loss of an "intuitive link" between Asia and Europe. This intuitive link was forged during initial contacts between the 16th and 17th centuries until the period between the end of the Second World War and the closing stages of decolonisation by the 1970s.

Until the end of the Cold War, both Asia and Europe became preoccupied with their own trajectories. Europe became predominantly engaged with its integration agenda, which left little resources and political energy to pursue active external relations. Asia also tended to neglect Europe as it became satisfied with its strong economic and political ties with Japan, the US and APEC as the US-led multilateral vehicle.

The 1990s could be said to mark the turning point in mutual relations. With the EU's signing of the Maastricht Treaty and the completion of the Single Market Programme by the end of 1992, Europe was in the position to rediscover its relations with Asia, which displayed its potential to become the centre of world economic growth.

At the same time, Asia was experiencing a growing perception of APEC as a mechanism to channel American business interests into rapidly growing Asian markets, as well as the vulnerabilities that come with an over-dependence upon American and Japanese markets. Given the circumstances, ASEAN was quick to respond to the lead taken by the European Commission through the latter's 1994 New Asia Strategy and subsequent initiatives seeking to improve trade and investment, higher education and environmental management and integration in ASEAN as well as to improve the EU's visibility in this region.

In essence, a new era of Asia-Europe and EU-ASEAN relations has only just begun and holds much promise for both regions and the international community. The EU is keen to help ASEAN to redress the enormous economic disparities between ASEAN members which are restraining the region's efforts towards deeper integration post-AFTA enroute to an ASEAN Community.

ASEAN countries are also appreciative of the constant support it receives from the

EU, including the latter's generous support for the reconstruction of post-tsunami Aceh in Indonesia. ASEAN can also draw upon some of the established 'best practices' by EU agencies in dealing with various security challenges and contingencies.

At the same time, in addition to providing European businesses with one of the world's largest regional markets, ASEAN can serve as the EU's cultural window in the latter's interlocution with the rest of Asia.

Overall, the loss of an intuitive link between the two regions should be seen as an opportunity. It is an opportunity to jettison the vestiges of an inferior-superior relationship plaguing Asian-European relations stemming from Asia's residual colonial baggage and Europe's post-Enlightenment sense of superiority.

Acknowledging the different qualitative and economic strengths offered by the EU and ASEAN are vital for a more equal partnership. That achievement serves to bolster all levels and areas of cooperation, redress inter-regional trade imbalances, and strengthen any lagging resolve towards building up processes such as ASEM.

These would add to the series of interesting events on top of Europe Day -- and ASEAN Day which is a mere three months away.

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